

# Christian Higher Education and the Great Commission: Teaching as Formation

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## Abstract

At the beginning of the third decade of the twenty-first century, Christian higher education is at an inflection point. The influence of Christian educational institutions in matters of culture, academia, and morality has waned. Over the past hundred years, this steady decline has only accelerated in recent decades as an increasingly secular, pluralistic society has brought tremendous pressure on Christian institutions. Many colleges choose to reject their historic confessional heritage and adopt cultural, philosophical, and ethical norms of the surrounding cultures. Alongside these cultural pressures is the persistent erosion in financial support from denominational and philanthropic agencies, forcing Christian colleges and universities to struggle to provide a financially viable academic experience.

**Key words:** Higher education; spiritual formation; faith integration

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## The Uncertain Future of Christian Higher Education

At the beginning of the third decade of the twenty-first century, Christian higher education is at an inflection point. The influence of Christian educational institutions in matters of culture, academia, and morality has waned. Over the past hundred years, this steady decline has only accelerated in recent decades as an increasingly secular, pluralistic society has brought tremendous pressure on Christian institutions. Many colleges choose to reject their historic confessional heritage and adopt cultural, philosophical, and ethical norms of the surrounding cultures. Alongside these cultural pressures is the persistent erosion in financial support from denominational and philanthropic agencies, forcing Christian colleges and universities to struggle to provide a financially viable academic experience.

In an address to the Society of Professors in Christian Education conference, David Dockery (2019), a noted Christian educator, reflected upon these challenges and identified fifteen areas of concern. These included concepts such as mission, economics, government oversight, demographics, technology, and globalization. Dockery states, "Christian educators must never lose sight of what it means to offer distinctive Christ-centered education that recognizes the importance of a theologically-shaped vision, informed by biblical truth, Christian worldview formation, and the Christian intellectual tradition" (2019, p.297). The growing national dialogue concerning student loan debt and access to an affordable college education has shifted the

mentality of many constituents toward the value of higher education. There is an increasing focus on a return of investment for each tuition dollar spent. Many prospective students and families view college as advanced vocational training for a specific career. This approach brings increased scrutiny and pressure on programs within universities' typical liberal arts divisions. The global Covid-19 pandemic, which began in the spring of 2020, has only served to intensify the effects of these forces on colleges and universities.

It is in this environment that the Christian college or university finds itself. These schools are experiencing pressure to orient themselves in this dramatically shifting setting. For some, it is a struggle for financial viability. For others, staying moored to historical theological confessions becomes challenging while advancing the university's academic profile. Regardless of the circumstance, Christian institutions of higher education must offer a compelling narrative and rationale for the value of the educational experiences.

These pressures are not unique to Christian colleges, but they are brought into stark relief when juxtaposed with the question of the purpose of a distinctively Christian institution. What is the mission of Christian higher education in the current cultural milieu? Is it merely a place where those of faith can find shelter from the secular influences of the surrounding society? Should these places only focus on theological and ministerial preparation? Questions regarding the identity and mission of Christian higher education are not new. A substantial and growing

body of literature seeks to answer these questions. Dockery (2016) has described the mission of Christian Higher Education in these terms:

At the heart of this calling is the need to prepare a generation of Christians to think Christianly, to engage the academy and the culture, to serve society, and to renew the connection with the church and its mission. To do so, the breadth and the depth of the Christian tradition will need to be reclaimed, renewed, revitalized, and revived for the good of Christian higher education. (p. 117)

In his work *Renewing Minds: Serving Church and Society through Christian Higher Education*, Dockery (2008) describes this mission in different terms:

the purpose of a Christian education would not be merely to make men and women pious Christians: a system which aimed too rigidly at this end alone would become only obscurantist. A Christian education must primarily teach people to be able to think in Christian categories. (p. 8)

If this conception of Christian higher education is true, it has far-reaching ramifications for how colleges and universities engage prospective students, craft learning experiences, cultivate on-campus environments, and send graduates into the world to be agents of change in various disciplines. Recruitment of new students becomes less of an arms race to build the most luxurious housing facilities or student fitness centers and more of casting a vision of what the students will experience in totality and how they will change throughout their academic careers. Classrooms will become places where faculty and students prize inquiry over transactional information delivery. Student life will become the heartbeat of campus as students live and operate within a vibrant community of growth and new experiences undergirded by a rich foundation of faith and character development. The goal of the Christian college experience will be less about vocational training and more about impacting and transforming society. This ambition will be successful as men and women enter their professions trained to think, perform their tasks, and offer services in a distinctively Christian manner.

The present essay argues that the answer to many of these challenges is to lean into the historic Christian heritage, not away from it. At its core, the act of teaching is formation - the development of the mind, the honing of skillsets, and the crafting of character. Christian institutions of higher education should engage with this task through the lens of a Christian worldview and under the mandate of the Great Commission. Each semester, colleges and universities

launch newly minted graduates into society, hoping that these men and women will be agents of change and forces for good in their communities. The infrastructure of Christian education should be constructed in such a way to facilitate this type of formation from the institutional level down to the individual classroom. Teaching designed for the transformation of the entire student has the immense potential to impact every sector of society and ensure the long-term viability of the Christian college experience.

### Higher Education and the Great Commission: Theological Foundations

The four Gospels of the New Testament record in vivid detail the teaching and ministry of Christ and his death, burial, and resurrection. His sermons, teachings, and parables have been the source of study and conjecture for over two thousand years. While it is impossible to distill Christ's teachings into simple statements, two of his most famous edicts bring much to bear to the discussion of Christian higher education. The first of these, located in Matthew 22:37-38, is known as the Great Commandment.

And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (*English Standard Version Bible*)

This passage, which itself is a restatement of the great Jewish *Shema* found in Deuteronomy 6:4-9, instructs believers to devote themselves and to love God with the totality of their being – heart, soul, and mind. This action of loving God with the mind provides the impetus for the concept of thinking “Christianly” about various academic disciplines.

Following the events of his passion, burial, and resurrection, Christ appears to his disciples and gives them this imperative:

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (*English Standard Version Bible*, Matt 28:18-20)

In addition to the immediate application to individual believers and local congregations, this Great Commission informs the task of Christian higher education. In *Faith and Learning on the Edge*, David Claerbaut (2004) directly

connects the Great Commission, the mandate to love the Lord with the mind, and higher education:

To develop a God consciousness, to adopt the mind of Christ, and to search for eternal wisdom are all part of the Great Commission's call to make disciples, as well as a partial fulfillment of the first commandment. It is to each believer how to love God with all of their minds. (p. 135)

Ultimately all endeavors undertaken in the name of Christ must align with the great *Missio Dei* – the mission of God “in which the church glorifies God among the nations by proclaiming and promoting the good news that God is redeeming a people for himself and bringing all things under his good rule” (Ashford, 2013, p. 239). In order to connect the teaching of the Great Commission with the mission of Christian higher education, it is necessary to exegete this passage and understand how the components work together to communicate a cohesive strategy to impact the world.

First, Christ's command to go into the world is grounded in the profound statement that “all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (v. 34). We find a parallel passage in Paul's letter to the Philippians where following the famous *kenosis* passage describing Christ's suffering and humiliation, we find these words:

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (*English Standard Version Bible*, Philippians 2:9-11)

What does the supremacy of Christ have to do with a Christian education? These passages radically destroy the sacred/secular distinction often present when considering matters of faith and learning. Christ's authority is not merely confined to matters of faith and spirituality but extends throughout creation and human flourishing. The impetus for scientific inquiry, anthropological study, or mathematical postulation takes place within the physical world under the authority of Christ. Christian institutions have an obligation to approach these and other disciplines with curiosity and a commitment to rigorous scholarship and teaching.

In light of Christ's authority, individual believers, the church, and other faith-based institutions hear the mandate to “Go, therefore and make disciples of all nations.” A correct theological system of beliefs (orthodoxy) rooted in the authority of Christ should lead to decisive actions, attitudes, and behaviors (orthopraxy). This passage is often

misunderstood as the call to convert non-believers to a set of beliefs. The purpose of this commissioning is to “make disciples.” “It includes evangelism, but more importantly involves the task of nurturing and teaching, particularly teaching those who are discipled to follow after righteousness as described in the teaching of Jesus” (Abernathy, 2015, p. 270). Therefore, the purpose of any Christian entity is not to propagate a religious belief system or cultural values but rather, through the power of the Spirit and under the authority of Christ, to help men and women come under the teaching and pattern of life of Christ Himself. We will see below that this has tremendous ramifications for the task of Christian colleges and universities.

Not only are we to go into all the world under the authority of Christ and make disciples, but we find the call to nurture and form them within a distinctively Christian environment. The command to baptize believers in the triune formula further denotes the unapologetic Christian theological and ethical framework. This faith is not a generic belief in an impersonal God but rather a radically clear affirmation of the Godhead - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is an unequivocally Christian action. While the primary domain of personal discipleship is within specific communities of baptized believers, Christian institutions of higher education have a tremendous responsibility and opportunity to shape the patterns of thoughts and beliefs in students leaving behind their adolescent years and embarking on their first steps of adulthood.

Alongside this commitment to the Great Commission is the conviction that God has created every student for a purpose. Consequently, the institution's role is to help students discover, prepare for, and live out their God-given purpose. Theologians refer to this concept as the *imago Dei* or the image of God. Historically, theologians have speculated as to the meaning of humanity's creation in the image of God, with some identifying that image in characteristics or qualities that are structurally similar to God. Others find the image of God in the call to humanity to exercise dominion over the earth. In the twentieth century, it was fashionable to think of image-bearing as a relational domain in which both genders jointly expressed the image of God.

At its core, the *imago* encapsulates these viewpoints and expresses a vocation each person is to fulfill. As each person discovers their specific vocation and embraces that path, their lives reflect the character and nature of God and bring Him glory in the world. Theologian Jeremy Begbie (2007) describes this dynamic of vocation and worship:

Understandably then, some refer to human beings as "priests of creation." The phrase is apt, for it speaks of a double movement. On behalf of God, as God's image bearers, humans are to mediate the presence of God to the world and in the world, representing his wise and loving rule. But this is so that on behalf of creation humans may gather and focus creation's worship, offering it back to God, voicing creation's praise. (p. 203)

These twin theological concepts of the Great Commission and the *imago Dei* serve as the foundation of Christian higher education for their center the academic work in the training and development of the individual student yet provides a trajectory for that work in a culturally diverse world.

### **Spiritual Formation and Higher Education: What is Spiritual Formation?**

If institutions of Christian higher education are to take seriously the mandate to help students discover their unique expression of the image of God and help them fulfill the Great Commission in the world, the totality of the educational experience on campus must be formational in nature. Far beyond mere career training or information dispensation, Great Commission-minded education forms the mind, body, affections, and spirit. The Great Commission's call to make disciples of all nations challenges administration and faculty members to evaluate curricula, course materials, and individual lectures through the lens of formation and student development. John Kilner (2018) connects this concept of formation in higher education with the doctrine of the image of God.

Because the Bible teaches that people as a whole are in God's image, education should engage the whole person, not merely the mental as opposed to the physical, spiritual, and other aspects of who people are. Character development and faith formation must have their place alongside intellectual growth as aims of Christian higher education. (p. 109)

The university environment is an ideal location in which to situate this spiritual action. Richard Averbeck (2008) provides a helpful distinction between the work of formation and its communal aspect:

The verbal idea in the word formation (i.e., to form, transform, conform) emphasizes the active focus of spiritual formation. This includes, first, the dynamics of the interaction between the Holy Spirit and our human spirit, and, second, the activities, or ways and means, by which we purposefully engage in the dynamics of

spiritual formation individually in our private lives, in relationships with others or like purpose in the community of faith, and in our missional engagement with the world. (p. 52)

The administration of an institution must intentionally design opportunities for students to engage with information, experiences, and a diverse cadre of students, faculty, and staff to facilitate this formation best. This finds expression in community life, intramural and competitive athletics, and spiritual life offices on campus. While some might question the responsibility of Christian higher education to engage with processes that seem in the domain of church ministry, Otto and Harrington (2016) argue that the task of formation in higher education is complementary to the church's mission:

Therefore, the statement that the Christian college has a responsibility for the development of the spiritual formation of its students should be altered in that Christian higher education does not have a specific responsibility to develop the spiritual formation of its students, but rather should focus on creating a distinct and purposeful atmosphere where spiritual formation is promoted and fostered. (p. 256)

There needs to be a reframing of the academic enterprise, which places the classroom within the larger university community on campus and constructs opportunities for those dynamics to interplay and reinforce each other.

Likewise, the faculty member should reimagine their role as a teacher. The emphasis shifts from being content-centric to student-centric:

A Christian educator may well be thought of as a curriculum designer who seeks to engage persons in education, service, fellowship, proclamation, and worship by integrating all of the above disciplines while recognizing that worship orients the entirety of a Christian's life journey. (Steibel, 2010, p. 341)

This emphasis does not diminish the importance of the content or the instructor but rather helpfully orients the classroom toward forming the entire person:

Christian education has had a tendency to focus on cognitive knowledge. Comprehension is seldom put forth as an end in itself but there has been the naive expectation that if knowledge is present then faith, virtue, compassion, justice, worship, and so on will automatically follow. (Bramer, 2001, p. 30)

A view of education with formation as its goal will lead to student experiences that emphasize both the intellectual, ethical, and relational aspects of knowledge and behaviors and will seek to apply them to an increasingly fragmented and diverse world.

### Approaches to Formative Teaching

Teaching for spiritual formation is the logical outflow of higher education institutions that seek to obey and embody the Great Commission. While this approach's theological and philosophical arguments are beneficial, examining how this type of teaching manifests in the classroom is critical. Formative teaching 1) emphasizes the development of craft and character, 2) models ethical and redemptive behavior, 3) seeks to embody the learning process through creative and impactful educational experiences, and 4) engages with students consistently with meaningful feedback and opportunities for holistic development.

The emphasis on craft and character demonstrates to students that they should not find their identities within their academic successes, grade point averages, or future career promotions. The communication of a discipline-specific body of knowledge pairs with the cultivation of curiosity for divergent fields of study. The successful application of knowledge in experiential settings such as the recital hall, baseball stadium, or physics laboratory should occur alongside a critical reflection on these endeavors' ethical and relational aspects. Capstone projects that provide summary demonstrations of a student's intellectual and performative development should include opportunities for students to mentor and invest in younger students. Some might view the emphasis on character development as misplaced. Still, when viewed through a theological lens, it becomes apparent that the virtues of craft and character align closely with the biblical concepts of knowledge and wisdom. The world desperately needs talented and gifted educators, physicians, social workers, and a host of professionals who excel in their specific roles and connect with others in meaningful ways, promote equitable lifestyles, and holistically engage with others.

Likewise, teaching in and out of the classroom should model ethical and redemptive behavior. Students need a safe place to wrestle with complicated social issues such as race, gender, and socioeconomic inequalities. The concept of formation is the embodiment of the *imago Dei*. In his second letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul connects this concept of the personal identity found in conformity to the likeness of Christ:

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, with unveiled face,

beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2 Cor 3:17-18)

As faculty leaders and mentors display this transformation in and out of the classroom, they serve as models for students on their journeys of self-discovery. Students need to see vital lives of faith thriving in the university environment of research, inquiry, and creation. As faculty members reflect Christ's work of redemption and reconciliation, students are encouraged to discover their part in the Christian story of redemption.

When studying the ministry of Christ, one finds the juxtaposition of extended sermons with smaller vignettes rooted in everyday life. Similarly, effective teaching in the spirit of the Greatest Commandment and the Great Commission will inspire students to reflect critically inward toward their beliefs and understanding while maintaining an expansive view toward their local communities and the global marketplace of ideas and commerce. Teaching for transformation rather than information transfer requires the careful design of learning experiences. Christian educators must challenge themselves to expand their pedagogical methods to engage students and content creatively. This approach recognizes the students' inherent differences and life experiences and models the diversity in unity expressed in the *imago Dei*.

Lastly, education toward the goal of formation requires personal investment from the faculty member. The Great Commission's call to make disciples is to cultivate the spiritual, emotional, and behavioral development of those who will follow after the discipline of Christ himself. "The task then of a disciple of Christ is to learn from, imitate, and emulate his life with one's whole being" (Anderson & Skinner, 2019, p. 67). This discipline involves categories of thought, belief, and behavior. Christ modeled this discipling relationship with his small group of twelve followers and the multitudes who followed after him. His personal investment involved instruction, modeling behavior, correction, team-building, and critical reflection. More importantly, he experienced life with them and personally invested in each of his disciples, even when he knew that some would reject his teaching and relationship for a season. This type of teacher-student relationship serves as an exemplar for transformative education. Teaching for formation shifts the dialogue away from grades and assignments toward comprehension and inculcation. Individual faculty members, academic degree programs, and departments and schools within the university must commit themselves to the often messy but rewarding work of personal investment, instruction, and redirection.

### A Virtuous Cycle of Formation

The vision for Christian higher education expressed here is an expansive one that challenges Christian colleges and universities' attitudes, priorities, and resources. Teaching informed by the Great Commission is anchored in the biblical principles of the *imago Dei*, fidelity to the scriptures, and committed to open inquiry and the discovery and transmission of knowledge and wisdom. If the concept of Christian higher education is to be faithful to the biblical record as it attempts to ground truths in present realities, educators will reinvigorate their classrooms and shift the focus from the content to the learner. This enlargement of vision toward formation will become a distinctive of institutions trying to differentiate themselves in a crowded marketplace for student enrollment. Education that is formative in nature connects with Christian and non-Christian students alike because the values and ethos of the approach transcend belief systems. Discipleship-oriented education is attractive to prospective students and is a critical tool in retaining current students.

The principles expressed above find expression in every level of an institution. Individual teachers can implement these practices on the assignment level within a given course. Specific program directors and department chairs can institute systematic measures to ensure the application of formative principles across a given discipline. Deans and other administrative leaders can build a culture that values the individual's journey of self-discovery and learning within a hospitable and caring environment of the educational community. Ultimately, presidents and boards of trustees, many of whom are required to give account to outside stakeholders, can confidently connect the university's purpose with the larger mission of Christ's kingdom work in the world. Transformative learning experiences provide the potential for Christian colleges and universities to impact communities, regions, and ultimately the world as each student discovers their God-given purpose and is equipped and resourced to live that out in the world. This becomes a virtuous cycle in which the learning process never ends. Students and faculty experience transformation over time and bring these new experiences and ideas to bear on their chosen fields of study, thus inspiring the next generation of teachers, scientists, doctors, artists, and engineers to be agents of transformation and discipleship.

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