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P A P E R S  
towards a biblical mind

# Do we need a Christian university?

by Nigel Paterson

*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge*

Proverbs 1:7a, attributed to Solomon

*Its [higher education's] research pushes back the frontiers of human knowledge and is the foundation of human progress. Its teaching educates and skills the nation for a knowledge-dominated age. It gives graduates both personal and intellectual fulfilment. Working with business, it powers the economy, and its graduates are crucial to the public services. And wide access to higher education makes for a more enlightened and socially just society.*

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## Summary

The concept of a university was substantially a Christian innovation, yet most modern universities are secular institutions. This paper surveys briefly the historical background which shows how this came about and the institutional landscape of higher education today. Next, biblical perspectives applicable to all Christians involved in higher education are explored. At the heart of the paper, there lies a discussion of the arguments for and against a Christian university, and the characteristics of such a new Christian university, as envisaged, are presented. The paper is intended to provoke readers across the world to thought, discussion and a more informed response to the many possibilities for Christian service within higher education.

## Introduction

The Early Church Fathers, such as Justin Martyr and Augustine, fostered the critical assimilation of the philosophy and learning of the ancient classical world into Christian culture and thought. Their writing ensured that the church developed a powerful intellectual tradition that engaged with secular scholarship and ideas. During the medieval period, Jewish and Christian scholars in Spain capitalised on the work of Muslim Arab commentators of classical works,<sup>2</sup> while theologians like Aquinas critically appropriated the philosophy of Aristotle. These were some of the main influences that created the intellectual basis for the rise and proliferation of the medieval Christian university. The world's first educational institution to be called a university was Bologna, in the eleventh century, followed by Paris in 1200. The medieval universities in Britain arose with the backing of the Roman Catholic Church. There was teaching in Oxford by the end of the eleventh century. In the medieval university, theology was the apex of study.<sup>3</sup> The Reformation not only deprived the Catholic Church of many of its universities but also brought a new level of emphasis on scholarly activity among Protestants and Catholics, leading to great increases in student numbers. The earliest Ivy League universities in the United States, such as Harvard (begun as a college in 1636), Yale (1701), Pennsylvania (1740) and Princeton (1746), were all founded as Christian places of learning. Rutgers, Dartmouth and Brown were all established by activist clergy.<sup>4</sup>

Francis Bacon (1561–1626) created the method of scientific induction. His work was a major influence within the methodological revolution which took over universities from the nineteenth century. Beyond Bacon's time, many of the most exciting intellectual advances, not least in the sciences, took place outside the universities. Newton was at Cambridge, but many other key figures in the Royal Society were gentlemen scholars. In the Age of Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, a central concept was the place of reason as the primary source of authority. In Britain, steps taken to make universities more inclusive diminished the clerical control of them. The conditions were thus created by the nineteenth century for the development of the secular academy reliant on a theologically-independent method of delivering true knowledge. The gradual loss of an overarching narrative contributed to divisions between academic disciplines that rendered them more

Bonus material available online

1 Department for Education and Skills, *The Future of Higher Education*, Stationery Office, 2003.

2 D. Pawson, *The Challenge of Islam to Christians*, Hodder, 2003.

3 D. A. Carson, 'Can there be a Christian university?', *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, 1998, pp.20–28.

4 G. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University*, Oxford University Press, 1994.

like insulated epistemological islands. In the nineteenth century, many more Christian colleges were founded. In England and Wales these were teacher training colleges that would train teachers so that more of the poor in the population could receive education. This was ‘widening participation’ before the expression came to be used by the church-related institutions that continue from that era.<sup>5</sup> The greatest number of Christian universities and colleges in a single country today is to be found in the United States. However, a large number of other such institutions have been founded across the world, many as a result of missionaries functioning as educators. For example, William Carey helped to found Serampore College in West Bengal.<sup>6</sup>

‘Christian higher education’ is taken here to refer to education in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) where Christ is honoured at an institutional level, both in their legal documents and in at least some of their official ceremonies. This in itself does not set the hurdle bar very high, even though it can be deeply challenging to preserve even such features. In order to see where a ‘Christian university’ fits into the current spectrum of Christian higher education, two alternative typologies are given here. The first of these could be called a churchman’s typology, as it makes distinctions primarily according to the church relatedness – or otherwise – of the institution. It has four categories:

- A higher education institution, or a college within one, founded by a denomination and with ongoing legal links to it. This might be referred to as a church university or church college, or neither of these expressions may be used. There are fourteen of these church-related institutions in England and Wales, with none in Scotland or Northern Ireland.
- A higher education college that was founded under the auspices of the church and which is now not legally connected to any denomination: its status as a church college is essentially historical. The contemporary impact of Christianity within these colleges varies greatly; they are exemplified in Britain by a number of colleges at Oxford, Cambridge and Durham.
- A higher education college founded by a group of Christians, or a Christian organisation, but not by a denomination. This may be termed a Christian college or university. It is this category which features in the title of this paper. There are none in this category in the United Kingdom, though there are many in the United States and in other countries. A Christian college or university might simultaneously include within it both highly Christian and highly atheistic pockets.
- A Christian college which is not an HEI but which offers higher education programmes accredited by a university. Moorlands College and London School of Theology are British examples.

A second typology could be called a spiritual heritage typology, as it can be used to classify institutions according to the extent of their commitment to their religious heritage. Benne<sup>7</sup> has produced a four-level typology which distinguishes, in diminishing order, a commitment to the institution’s religious heritage. My own research has indicated that most Church universities and colleges in Britain are located in the intentionally pluralist category.<sup>8</sup> Benne distinguished:

- orthodox (e.g. nearly 100 per cent of members fit the orthodoxy tests)
- critical mass (e.g. there is a critical mass of Christian representation in all facets)
- intentionally pluralist (e.g. there is some intentional Christian representation in some areas)
- accidentally pluralist (e.g. there is a haphazard sprinkling of Christians).

## Some biblical perspectives

The two typologies given above could obscure the fact that many

Christians are serving Christ within higher education but without fitting any of them, because they are in secular institutions. There are many ways of serving Christ in the higher education sector, and it is not intended here to set one way above another. Jesus repeatedly sent off his disciples in twos, and there is much that small numbers of Christians can do. This section, therefore, considers some areas on which all Christians in higher education can agree.

For the academic Christian, so preoccupied with matters such as knowledge, evidence and debate, there is great release in the fact that all truth is God’s truth and hence Christ’s truth. Solomon and Jesus are both presented in Scripture as a personification of wisdom. As ‘the earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it’,<sup>9</sup> including the so-called secular world, the world is not there to be claimed for Christ – it is there to be reclaimed. Christians, seeking to love God with all their mind,<sup>10</sup> do not need to spend any time fearing what truth may be unearthed as they faithfully pursue a particular subject or line of enquiry. God’s revelation in the Bible and God’s revelation in the world are not going to be in disagreement.<sup>11</sup> There is an inevitable creative tension to be worked out between being set apart and being a light to the world. Old Testament exemplars of this are provided by characters such as Joseph and Daniel. If that creative tension is not worked out effectively, there are dangers of being so separated that no great influence is exerted or so integrated with worldly practice that little visible light from God shines through.

The expression *common grace* is used to refer to the grace of God given even to non-Christians. Thus, creation is open to all as a field of study. This means that Christians can readily work alongside non-Christians in a wide range of academic matters, and individuals among the latter will often exceed the achievements of the former. The New Testament nonetheless makes a useful distinction between two kinds of wisdom that are not distinguished in the secular academy: wisdom from above and earthly wisdom. Earthly wisdom is indeed ‘earthly, natural, demonic’ and characterised by jealousy and selfish ambition, ‘but the wisdom from above is pure, peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy’.<sup>12</sup>

There is ample reason for continued use of the Bible within academia. It is a book that has deeply enriched Western imagination and thought. Many European towns and cities would be robbed of some of their finest buildings if those inspired by the Bible were removed, and that is just an outward picture of this book’s great impact on Western culture.

In order to help convey the debates around the topic, there follows a list of arguments for and against a Christian university. It should be noted that a Christian university does not need to be on the scale of a large secular university. It could specialise in the arts and the humanities, which avoids the issues of scale and funding associated with science and engineering.

## Arguments for a Christian university

- If ‘the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge’,<sup>13</sup> there is a place for a university that believes and acts upon that. In contrast, the secular academy does not start there. Instead, its energies can all too easily be directed by political influences towards wealth creation and utilitarianism, as the second quotation on the first page has indicated.
- A Christian worldview can be explored and articulated in a Christian university. Research can be more easily facilitated in areas that complement a Christian worldview. Subjects and research centres can function that might easily be blocked from starting or closed down in the secular academy. Learning and teaching can be underpinned by a Christian worldview which affects what is studied and how it is studied. A Christian university can facilitate the development of an authentically Christian mind,<sup>14</sup> and every aspect of its shared life can be penetrated with

5 Church of England Board of Education, *Mutual Expectations: The Church of England and Church Colleges / Universities*, 2006.

6 Serampore College (2008), ‘History’. Retrieved from [www.seramporecollege.org/asc/aschistory.htm](http://www.seramporecollege.org/asc/aschistory.htm)

7 R. Benne, *Quality With Soul: How six premier colleges and universities keep faith with their religious traditions*, Eerdmans, 2001.

8 N. Paterson, *The Identity and Values of Church Colleges and Universities in Twenty-first Century Britain*, EdD thesis, University of Southampton, 2007.

9 Ps. 24:1.

10 Mark 12:30.

11 e.g. Rom. 1:20.

12 Jas. 3:13–18.

13 Prov. 1:7.

14 H. Blamires, *The Christian Mind: How Should a Christian think?*, (3<sup>rd</sup> edn.), Regent College Publishing, 2005.

Christian perspectives.<sup>15</sup> John Henry Newman<sup>16</sup> (1801–90), propounded the concept of (Catholic, as he saw it) students acquiring what he called ‘universal knowledge’, a comprehensive form of knowledge in which different subjects would be seen as parts of knowledge as a whole. It is difficult to see any equivalent to this being possible within the contemporary secular academy.

- The study of theology, and of religion more generally, can be prioritised. Theology was once the queen of the sciences in a university.<sup>17</sup> In a Christian university, it can be both accorded its important place among academic subjects and engaged in ways that serve the church and the world. Beyond those studying theology, there can be a widely-shared acceptance in a Christian university that there is a religious dimension to life which merits respect and academic scrutiny.
- An academic community of Christian scholars facilitates opportunities for concerted interdisciplinary discussion and research. Ford<sup>18</sup> has noted the great difference between the amount of energy, intelligence and publications being invested in specialist fields and the comparatively small amount being done in academia to address the interrelations and interconnections of these fields. The latter can be privileged in a Christian university. A Christian university also makes possible a shared level of community. Markham<sup>19</sup> has contrasted the ‘family’ model of organization, found in a Christian university, with the ‘hotel’ model found in a secular university. In a family, there are expectations of shared values and cultures. In a hotel, allcomers are free to conduct themselves almost as they wish in the privacy of their own rooms, and the shared space is neutral.
- A Christian university provides the opportunity for greater impact and public visibility, including being a challenge to other institutions. There can be more overt outward-looking Christian mission, besides other service to the church and the world. It can embrace the two commissions of the Bible, that of the creation mandate and the priority of the gospel.<sup>20</sup> In the United States, some small Christian colleges have made an impact out of all proportion to their size. Some of their graduates have gone on to have significant influence within the secular academy. The philosophy programme at Calvin College produced thinkers like Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, who spearheaded the revival of Christian philosophy in the second half of the twentieth century. Calvin and Wheaton College also provided a base for influential Christian historians like George Marsden and Mark Noll. Scholars in Christian colleges and universities are positively encouraged to write books and articles about how a Christian perspective changes the way a subject or discipline looks. Many of the key resources of this kind have emerged from American Christian colleges, with books giving a Christian perspective on areas such as the arts, literature, economics and philosophy. Christian scholars in secular universities are often too busy writing more specialist books or articles to find time to do this.
- A Christian university can provide an important launching base for Christian social action. For example, a vision for sustained Christian witness in a pluralised world, put forward by the Dutch theologian and politician Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920), gave impetus to the foundation of the Free University of Amsterdam in 1880.<sup>21</sup> Kuyper helped to inspire a world-encompassing view of God’s saving action and a world-engaging understanding of the Christian calling which is still being worked out in various institutions, such as Calvin College in the United States.<sup>22</sup>

## Arguments against a Christian university

- A Christian university can unintentionally ghettoise its students, rendering them ill-prepared for life and influence in a largely secular society. This can be associated with a corresponding spiritual vacuum elsewhere in higher education in the country. It can be questioned whether the scale of a Christian university makes it more effective than smaller Christian colleges for nurturing life-long disciples of Christ.
- It diverts substantial Christian funding away from other important causes, while its relatively small scale adds to the challenges of meeting government standards applicable to all universities. It can be argued that many of the qualities of a Christian university can be achieved with much less effort and expense by Christians functioning elsewhere in Christian higher education or within the secular academy.
- It is questionable whether such a university can begin and continue to be staffed with enough Christians. If not, there is great risk that the whole enterprise will be rendered counterproductive because of having non-Christians purporting to model Christian values. The example of specifically Christian political parties in continental Europe illustrates the difficulties of collectively holding a moral or ethical line in a complex and public environment.
- It is questionable how long the original vision of a Christian university can be sustained, given the ongoing need for Christian staff and other resources, and the challenges arising from political interference and the dominant intellectual spirit of the age.
- A Christian university can be perceived to be divisive in a way that any university is which selects staff or students with notice taken of their adherence to an ideology or religion. It is likely to draw some direct opposition from militant atheists. The concept of a Christian university can seem an oxymoron to some, as noted by Scott-Joynt<sup>23</sup> and Carson,<sup>24</sup> even though the first universities were Christian in their origins. A Christian university may also be charged with increasing division in society by indirectly justifying the foundation of new universities loyal to other religions such as Islam.

## A possible model for a new Christian university

Having asked the question ‘Can there be a Christian University?’ in his paper with that title, Carson concluded ‘Of course. But there is much work to be done, many things to be learned, and many commitments to undertake...’.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, if another meaningfully Christian university is to be founded, and certainly such aspirations for this exist across the world, careful thought needs to be given about what it would be like.

Its overall vision could be to be a university which studies, teaches and researches at the frontiers of knowledge while giving wholehearted allegiance to the revelation of God in the gospel of Jesus Christ. It will need some well-defined priorities, and these will undoubtedly reflect those of its founders and sponsors. Some candidates for this list of priorities include: use of the Bible within all its courses, the pursuit of excellence, equipping students for leadership in all walks of life, a relational emphasis (as reflected in its ethos, curriculum and goals), confessional integrity and fidelity, and maintaining the vision of the university.

As part of my preparation for my thesis on organisational identity and core values,<sup>26</sup> I worked through the whole Bible, looking for all evidence available of what could be considered to be centrally important in a Christian university context. As a result of that process, I identified the possibility of eight core values; a brief explanation follows in each case:

- The pursuit of true knowledge, wisdom, understanding in a Christian community dedicated to learning.<sup>27</sup>

15 A. Holmes, *The Idea of a Christian College* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn.), Eerdmans, 1987.

16 J. H. Newman, (F. M. Turner, ed.) *The Idea of a University*, Yale University Press, 1996.

17 D. A. Carson, ‘Can there be a Christian university?’, *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, 20–28, 1998.

18 D. F. Ford, ‘God in the University’, Public lecture at Leicester University, 10 February 1998; ‘The future of Cambridge University’, Lady Margaret’s Sermon preached in the University Church, Great St. Mary’s, Cambridge, 4 November 2001.

19 I. S. Markham, ‘The idea of a Christian university’, in J. Astley, L. Francis, J. Sullivan and A. Walker, (eds.), *The Idea of a Christian University*, Paternoster Press, 2004.

20 R. Macaulay, ‘The great commissions’, *Cambridge Papers*, Vol.7, No.2, 1998.

21 J. A. Carpenter, ‘The perils of prosperity: Neo-Calvinism and the future of religious colleges’, in P. J. Dove, (ed.), *The Future of Religious Colleges*, Eerdmans, 2002.

22 VU Amsterdam, ‘About VU Amsterdam: History’, from [www.vu.nl/en/about-vu-amsterdam/mission-and-profile/history/index.asp](http://www.vu.nl/en/about-vu-amsterdam/mission-and-profile/history/index.asp)

23 M. Scott-Joynt, ‘A Christian foundation for intellectual freedom’, The Winton Lecture, King Alfred’s College, Winchester, 1997.

24 D. A. Carson, ‘Can there be a Christian university?’, *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, 20–28, 1998.

25 Ibid.

26 N. Paterson, *The Identity and Values of Church Colleges and Universities in Twenty-first Century Britain*, EdD thesis, University of Southampton, 2007.

27 Ps. 111:2; 133:1–3; Prov. 1:7; 2:2; 4:5a; 7; 24:3–4; Col. 2:3, 8; 2 Tim. 3:16; Jas. 3:13–18.

- The good news of Jesus Christ for the world and the response of faith:<sup>28</sup> the good news (i.e. the gospel) of Jesus Christ was the primary aspect of his preaching and was a message to be passed on to the whole world.
- The ongoing development of character among staff and students:<sup>29</sup> faith is invalid without a life that matches it.
- Love, reverence, worship, prayer and praise towards God as revealed in Jesus Christ:<sup>30</sup> blessing, reverential worship, prayer and praise are to be given to God in all times, places and circumstances. This is not necessarily easy to achieve in the context of student culture.
- Development of individuals to reach their highest potential:<sup>31</sup> the Parable of the Talents shows that individuals should invest what they have in terms of their abilities, opportunities and responsibilities rather than bury them.
- Love and humility towards all humanity, with special care for the poor and vulnerable:<sup>32</sup> Christians should be 'ready for every good deed' and should show consideration for all people.
- Hope of the return of Jesus Christ:<sup>33</sup> this is the central Christian hope.
- Justice, righteousness and holiness:<sup>34</sup> 'righteousness exalts a nation' and, by the same principle, righteousness exalts an organisation.

It seems preferable, though not essential, that the governors of a new Christian university are drawn from within an established Christian organisation, thus promoting unity and cohesion in the development of such a demanding project. In order to maintain and take forward the Christian vision of such a university, it seems essential that the Board members, senior managers, senior staff responsible for recruiting others and some other key staff (e.g. the head of theology) are and remain committed Christians. It is anticipated that not all staff and students will be Christians but will need to be at least supportive of the vision and values of the university.

It has already been suggested that a Christian university could specialise in the arts and humanities. This would avoid the problems of trying to attract large-scale funding for equipment and scientific research. However practical that course of action may be, the Dutch philosopher Dooyeweerd<sup>35</sup> (1894–1977) has argued that science is an aspect of human vocation given by God in creation. A non-Christian view that makes absolute what is in fact relative ends up destroying that aspect of creation and taking the strength out of life and experience as a whole. To avoid the study of science in a Christian university, therefore, could be seen as detrimental to both science and the world.

Further work on the concept of a Christian university entails detailed study of models and examples worldwide and then working out what is practicable and transferable. Some wariness is needed when attempting to take educational ideas across national borders. Walford<sup>36</sup> has demonstrated some of the pitfalls awaiting those who attempt this, showing the risks of taking partially understood educational practice from one country and trying to apply it in the context

of another. Ongoing discussions about a Christian university can lead to partnerships with other Christian organisations and individuals who embrace the vision. Substantial discussions are also needed with sympathetic politicians and government officials, to a point where they too become supporters of the project going forward.

An interesting alternative to a Christian university is the concept of a Christian pre-university course for gap-year Christian students before they start a degree programme in a state-funded university. *De Evangelische Hogeschool*<sup>37</sup> (The Evangelical High School) in Amersfoort, Holland, is a Reformed high school which provides a course which pre-university students can attend for one or two years. Wider application of this concept could help Christian students to carry greater influence into universities worldwide.

Lastly, it needs to be emphasised that Christian universities are just one expression of Christian higher education, besides the many possibilities for Christian service within other areas of higher education. Even in unsympathetic university environments, Christian staff and students can form groups for fellowship. Academic co-operation between Christians can take place without there being any overarching Christian ethos in the institution (e.g. a humanities community). Michael Schluter has done a considerable amount of work on the concept of a relational university, more details of which are accessible on the *Cambridge Papers* website. Such a university would be based on the ethical values of the Judaeo-Christian tradition rather than on a set of doctrinal beliefs. It would thus be more inclusive than a Christian university. There would be no need to avoid government funding, and it would be considerably less demanding on Christian resources.

## Conclusions

This paper has presented the case for and against Christian universities. It is anticipated that Christians in different societies and even within the same society will come to legitimate but different conclusions about their appropriateness. My own conclusion is that Christian universities have their place in higher education and that a country with a well-established Christian community would be enriched by the presence of at least two or three Christian universities. Recognising that there are differing views about the merits of Christian universities, Christians can at least be in agreement about the importance of Christ in the academy, while responding in legitimately different ways to the many challenging possibilities for following him there.

37 De Evangelische Hogeschool (2008). Dutch language website for the school retrieved from [www.eh.nl](http://www.eh.nl)

28 Mark 1:14, 15; 13:10; Rom. 1:16–17.

29 2 Pet. 1:5–7 (NASB); Jas. 2:14–26.

30 Ps. 2:11; 34:1; 36:9; 103 (all); Jn. 1:14; 4:23, 24; Rom. 12:12; Heb. 4:16.

31 Matt. 25:14–30; Phil. 4:13; Ps. 108:13.

32 Tit. 3:1–2 (NASB); Jer. 9:24; Prov. 11:2; Matt. 22:39; Rom. 12:6–8; Gal. 2:20.

33 Tit. 2:13; 1 Pet. 1:13; 1 Thess. 4:13–5:11.

34 Prov. 14:34; Mic. 6:8; Matt. 5:6; Rom. 12:6–21.

35 H. Dooyeweerd, *In the Twilight of Western Thought*, Craig Press, 1972.

36 G. Walford, 'Evangelical Christian schools in England and the Netherlands', *Oxford Review of Education*, 27:4, 2001, pp.529–541.

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