

21E PRESERVING QUALITY WITH SOUL

(by Paul)

Robert Benne's book *Quality with Soul* [1] was written in response to two earlier books, *The Dying of the Light* by James Burtchell [2] and *The Soul of the American University* by George Marsden [3]. Both of these volumes trace the sobering history of early Christian higher education in America. Over one hundred institutions established before the Civil War were church –related, and not a single one retained that identity into the 20th century.

Harvard was founded in 1636 with these words for its students-“(E)veryone should consider the end of life and studies, to know God and Jesus Christ, which is eternal life.” Yale began in 1701 as a seminary for Congregationalist ministers. Dartmouth, in 1769, was established to evangelize the Indians. These were followed by Williams, Brown, Bowdoin, Princeton – all today recognized as academic but none recognized as Christian.

And so we come to the issue today– How do we maintain “quality with soul” –academic excellence and spiritual vitality without compromising either?

Certainly complacency will blind us. Vigilance, insight and preparation are needed. We realize that the natural drift is downward. There is spiritual opposition to real Christian education. If not deliberately maintained, any Christian institution can drift away from doctrinal truth; any educational body can fall into mediocrity.

We must learn from history. Many institutions changed from deep commitment to pietism, indifference, and finally rationalism or secularism. [4]

All the schools that drifted, says Benne, went through three phases – first, by making education nonsectarian, then by an appeal to spiritual and moral values of a vaguely religious or rational cast, and finally by the exclusion of specifically Christian values and practices in the name of allegedly universal intellectual, moral, and democratic qualities. [5]

Sometimes it was precipitated by a struggle between Unitarians and Calvinists for control, sometimes by an anemic spiritual climate that resulted in jettisoning the chapel and faith requirements, sometimes by the tempting offer of funds to less sectarian institutions.

Benne suggests the presence of three elements in those schools that he considers to have preserved quality with soul—[6]

- The right guiding vision
- The right community of people
- The right unifying ethos (the culture or environment)

On the spiritual side (at the foundation) –

1. The right vision-

Vision is the foundation –fleshed out in the mission statement with beliefs outlined in the statement of faith: The institution exists to glorify God.

2. The right people –

From the top down –Here the key idea is “mission fit,” beginning with full allegiance to basic Christian doctrine. The right people, says Benne, will carry forward the “spiritual DNA of the institution.” From the board of trustees to the President, who sets the overall direction of the University, to the Provost and the faculty – “the ground troops” –as teachers, mentors, and role-models. Ideally, God works through the faculty to impact student lives. [7]

Some institutions have moved to the concept of “critical mass”: If ½ or 2/3 of a faculty hold to denominational teachings or are even believers of any background, the school may feel that the foundation is maintained. The idea seems to be: Hire the best faculty without regard for their beliefs and hope that chapel and other programs will develop students spiritually. This sends a mixed message to the students.

“Even a purely secular school is better than a nominally Christian college. At least at a secular school you know where everyone stands.” [8]

It is far easier to ask a faculty of less than a hundred to describe their relationship to Christ than to ask a faculty of several hundred or a faculty of over a thousand. (It is also far easier to locate a hundred faculty members with a strong commitment to Christ than one hundred with allegiance to a particular denomination.)

Faculty must not only hold to essential Christian doctrine but have a growing faith and an ability to articulate what they believe. Emphasize humility and servanthood.

3. The right ethos – a cutting edge Christian atmosphere.

Exhibit Biblical truth and Christian love, not “cold, dead orthodoxy” nor phony spirituality (everyone reading a poem, holding hands and singing “Kumbayah.”)

- Students are coming to Christ and being discipled
- Prayers are being answered
- The community is being impacted

Chapel programs, sometimes challenging the heart and sometimes challenging the mind, must be kept central. The tendency is to move from a required chapel to a voluntary chapel to a haphazard mediocre chapel to no chapel at all.

On the academic side, the same three elements (vision, people, ethos) are essential.

1. Vision-

- High academic standards

- A community of learners
- Value placed on scholarship

Leaders of the Reformation- Luther, Calvin, Knox, and Melancthon- were themselves men of the mind as well as the heart. Modern Christians should be no less. Though we can never argue someone into the kingdom, it does not follow that we should abandon all arguments about the kingdom. Faith alone saves, but faith that save sis never alone, as the apostle James so eloquently reminds us. Nor is faith enough for the growth of a student; that same faith must have an object and that object a content for study. God implants within each student the basic desire not only to know Him in revelation but also in creation.

[9]

Scholarship is a cycle of learning and sharing, most likely the wider Boyer model, which includes scholarship of application, integration, and communication (teaching). [10]

Where might we begin in scholarly pursuit?

Consider these questions:

- What difference does a Christian worldview make to my discipline?
- What are the controversial issues in my discipline?
- What are the major unsolved problems in my discipline?
- What is unique about the teaching-learning paradigm in my discipline?
- What are the primary ethical issues in my discipline?
- How could my discipline be applied in new ways to meet the needs of others?

The end results could be world-changing.

Scholarship, like everything we do, can be done to the glory of God. Beyond this, good scholarship (and it must be good) opens the door to many new professional contacts, some of whom need Christ. While they may not all come to salvation as a result of interacting with us, they should all receive a blessings and be brought closer to God as a result of interacting with us.

Valuable scholarship will require an investment of time and money. It always has.

2. People-

Faculty who hold the vision of high standards and the pursuit of knowledge.

Not all of us will be prolific but we all need to have the mindset of scholars.

3. Ethos-

In terms of ethos, preserving quality requires maintaining a true academic climate.

While we don't want to give the message that learning is always fun, fun, fun, it is always important, often rewarding, and parts of it can be very enjoyable. Let's advertise Christian colleges as a place where academics are central.

I believe we must do four things-

- Keep a focus on key concepts, especially at the introductory level.
- Focus on the strengths of each department and the unique niche and contribution of each faculty member.
- Keep grades meaningful. If everyone earns an “A”, then “A” means “average”, rather than “awesome.”
- Protect students from true danger, but don’t shelter them from controversial issues, from the hard realities of the workplace, or even from areas where we simply don’t now the answers.

At the same time, we must understand our limits and model balance.

I like the cartoon of two professors looking at the gravestone of a colleague, and one says to the other –“Poor Smidley –He published, but he perished anyway.”

So – should the schools of the colonial days be our models?

While their commitment to God was admirable, most colonial schools placed faith above learning, often rejected modern ideas without a critical study, and many lacked a commitment to broad knowledge and scientific research.

At the bottom line- A primary cause of the quality vs. soul problem has been an artificial separation of the sacred and secular areas of life, between faith and knowledge.

Many faculty, says Benne, compartmentalized their lives into two different worlds: a workday one in which their discipline held sway, and a private one in which their faith survived. [11]

As a result,

- Religion is seen as irrational, private, treated more like a hobby than an ultimate concern
- Faith is seen as a blind leap
- Religion is only minimally significant in life
- Christianity has nothing to contribute to the academy

On the contrary, we know that

- All of life belongs to God
- All knowledge originates with God
- Modern science actually developed out of a Christian worldview
- Students can use their expertise to serve God.

Again, let’s look at the three elements-

Vision-

“The Christian account of life and reality is seen as **the** organizing paradigm for the identity and mission of the University.” [12]

Consider Christ Himself as the goal of all knowledge – Christ, “the Power of God and the Wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:24); “He is before all things and in Him all things hold

together” (Col. 1:17); “In Him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”(Col. 2:3)

People-

This calls for faculty who love Christ, who desire academic quality, and who embrace the true integration of faith and learning.

“Every discipline will be done differently if approached with Christian presuppositions.”[13]

Ethos—

Christian higher ed. needs a culture of specifically Christian scholarship, not simply “Biblical ideas trumping worldly knowledge,” (ref- Benne) but a close look at all ideas through a Biblical lens. If done properly, a Christian education is the broadest possible education, not the narrowest.

What might be needed? We might consider-

- An ongoing dialogue on integration
- A multi-session faculty seminar on faith and learning in each discipline
- Summer conferences on faith and scholarship
- Special chapels for faculty only
- Opportunities for faculty to learn more theology

What is a Christian university? What really defines it?

Many administrators and educators have looked deeply at the question:

According to Robert Sloane-

“At Christian schools we must believe that there is an underlying unity of truth. We must refuse to separate religion and life...Christian higher education is nothing less than the attempt through the individual and communal activities of thinking, teaching, researching, discussing, performing, and living, to understand the totality of life, history, and the universe in relationship to the Lordship of the crucified and risen Jesus Christ.”

[14]

According to Dane Fowlkes—

“The heart of a Christian university is to instill a Christian worldview while assisting and preparing students to discover and prepare for their vocational calling from God, thereby equipping them to function positively as Kingdom citizens.” [15]

Peter Bosscher added-

The goal of any curriculum should be to educate for life, not just thought. It is important for the life of the community that individuals study not just for themselves but for the good of the community....

(A)s humans we shall still have to ask what those jobs themselves are for. How will the job I'm preparing for serve other people? How will it clean a lake instead of polluting one? How will it offer opportunity to marginalized people rather than crowd them still

further out to the rim of things? How will it yield an honestly built product or genuinely useful service? In other words, how will the knowledge, skills, and values of my university education--how will these things be used to clear some part of the human jungle, or restore some part of the lost loveliness of this world, or introduce some novel beauty into it? That is, how does my education and work make for sustainable peace (in Hebrew shalom)? Shalom is both God's cause in the world and our human calling. The implication of this is that our work will always have the two dimensions of a struggle for justice and the pursuit of increased mastery of the world so as to enrich human life. Ours is both a cultural mandate and a liberation mandate --the mandate to master the world for the benefit of humankind, but also the mandate "to loose the chains of injustice, and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke...to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter --when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood. (Isa. 58:6-7) [16]

Charles Adams wrote-

Faculty, administrators, and staff, i.e., all persons who are called to labor at a Christian college, are servants who occupy a particular office (calling). "It is important that a sense of office pervade all aspects of the college." "To occupy a position at the college means to be placed in a God-ordained office requiring educational service in self-effacing love and obedience to the Lord."

A Christian college aims to train kingdom citizens to be aware of the demands of God's mandate to transform culture, to become equipped to take their place and carry out their tasks within the community of believers, to be able to discern the spiritual direction of our civilization, and to be prepared to advance, in loving service, the claims of Christ over all areas of life.

This is the central task of the college and (it) ought to be the motivating force behind all persons or artifacts involved with the college. [17]

Finally, John Huiskens wrote-

...God reveals Himself through His Word and His creation. Man, then, when he is placed in the creation, comes face to face with this revelation of God. And, seeing God, he cannot help responding... Man works with creation, he digs in it, he dissects it, he analyzes it with his telescopes and microscopes, he builds, he constructs; he writes, he paints, in a word he produces a culture. It is these cultural productions which are the subject material of your curriculum. The important thing that we have to see in this respect is that we have to learn how to properly handle this culture. We must be able to evaluate it, analyze it, and by all means criticize it. We must ask ourselves what does that culture say and why does it say what it does. Never must we fall into the idea that somehow this culture is neutral, that the Christian can take it or leave it, or, at best, all he has to do is to somehow miraculously transform it. Never must we accept it at face value. We have to make judgments, value judgments, spiritual-ethical judgments, judgments as to whether it is good or bad. [18]

Am I optimistic or pessimistic about our future?

We have the vision, we have leaders committed to keeping the Christian foundation and to following where God leads, we have committed faculty, we have some models of scholarship, we have a goal of integrating faith and knowledge. I believe even greater days are ahead for Christian higher education.

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