

## **The Role of the Christian University in the Cultivation of the Evangelical Mind**

Dr. Rick Ostrander, *Christian Scholar's Review* 47, Number 4 (Summer 2018)

If the “evangelical mind” is going to thrive in modern society, one would expect Christian universities to be instrumental in that process. They have mission statements that typically include the promotion of rigorous Christian thinking, and they employ professors who are paid to read, write, and think (among other things). In today’s educational landscape, however, several factors exist that make the promotion of Christian scholarship problematic. Despite the challenges, I believe that the Christian university can be a vital contributor to the renewing of the evangelical mind. This brief paper will explain both the challenges and the possibilities regarding Christian scholarship within Christian universities. But first, some personal background:

In 1996, historian Mark Noll penned his memorable *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, in which he argued the “scandal” was no evangelical mind existed. Twenty years later, in January 2016, four Christian scholars—George Marsden, Richard Mouw, Alvin Plantinga, and Nicholas Wolterstorff—addressed a packed auditorium at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan in a symposium entitled “The Renaissance of Christian Scholarship.” Calvin College had supported and helped nurture these scholars early in their careers through research grants and a culture of critical inquiry.

Over the past few decades, they observed, a significant number of evangelical college graduates have gone on to doctoral programs and embarked on academic careers. Funding sources such as Lilly, Pew, the Issachar Fund, and the Templeton Religious Trust helped to nurture scholarly work among evangelicals. In his portion of the symposium, George Marsden noted the considerable growth in the number of professors in the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities with Ph.D.’s and scholarly publications. “Visit just about any of these schools,” he remarked, “and you will find Christian scholars of the most impressive quality.”

I am a former student of George Marsden, and after studying with him, I spent several years as a professor, dean, and provost at two Christian colleges. I now serve at the “home office” of the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities in Washington, D.C., where part of my job consists of supporting Christian scholarship through faculty grant programs. I interact regularly with Christian college provosts and have visited dozens of our campuses over the past few years. In reflecting on the role of the Christian university in cultivating the evangelical mind, therefore, I will base my observations on the 140 or so CCCU institutions in the U.S.—all of whom claim a commitment to being both seriously Christian

and truly academic. Such a sample, of course, leaves out some significant Christian universities such as Notre Dame, Valparaiso, and others.<sup>1</sup>

Is the “evangelical mind” flourishing in CCCU institutions? Yes and no. My provost colleagues claim to be generally optimistic about the state of faculty scholarship on their campuses. Nevertheless, significant challenges exist to cultivating the sort of robust scholarly life that those Calvin scholars have exemplified in their careers. So first, let me outline the challenges to Christian scholarship that exist among our schools before speaking to its future possibilities.

### **Challenges to Christian Scholarship**

First, while it is less prevalent than twenty years ago, something of a “scandal of the evangelical mind” still exists in certain parts of American evangelicalism. Some of our schools’ constituents fear what unfettered faculty research in areas such as human origins or human sexuality could mean for a professor’s theological beliefs. Infrequent, but widely-publicized, episodes in which faculty publications or social media posts created controversy for an institution can spark concerns among administrators about supporting faculty scholarship.<sup>2</sup> After all, most CCCU institutions are heavily tuition-driven and therefore depend on the trust and good will of constituents and supporting denominations. Faculty controversies that undermine that trust can lead to enrollment declines, which in turn create financial problems. In such a tenuous environment, is the risk of public controversy through faculty scholarship really worth it?

And even if theological concerns do not exist, it can be difficult to make the case that significant resources should be devoted to supporting scholarship, which for many Christians seems tangential to colleges’ main purpose of preparing students to enter the workforce—albeit with Christian character. Many CCCU schools pride themselves on being teaching-focused institutions, which naturally leads to questions about the role of scholarship. What does a professor’s research on sea barnacles, for example, have to do with preparing education majors to be science teachers?

In addition, if one queries the typical provost on our campuses, CCCU institutions may value faculty scholarship, but financial realities often get in the way. The fact is, supporting scholarship costs money—for release time for research, for lab equipment, for travel to conferences, and so on. The average tuition discount rate at private universities in the U.S. is nearly 50%. In other words, our schools are being asked to meet rising student (and parent) expectations regarding their college experience with fewer tuition dollars. Imagine having to weigh a faculty summer research grant or that new electron microscope against a badly needed cafeteria upgrade or leaky roof repair.

Moreover, tight budgets mean that teaching loads for full-time faculty remain high, despite good intentions by administrators. The typical teaching load for professors at Christian colleges is four classes per semester, in contrast to two courses per semester at research universities. Then there are academic advising responsibilities and committee assignments. Thus, CCCU professors have many demands on their time that can crowd out that research monograph, musical composition, or lab experiment. I know from personal experience that a Christian academician's scholarly career is often maintained in life's margins such as Christmas holidays, summer break, and Saturday mornings.

### **Future Possibilities for Christian Scholarship**

Clearly, significant challenges exist for the evangelical mind at Christian universities. Despite such challenges, however, I remain cautiously optimistic that CCCU institutions will continue to cultivate Christian thinking in the future. One reason for optimism is that the supply of seriously Christian scholars continues to issue forth from secular graduate schools such as Harvard and Michigan and from Christian Ph.D. programs like Baylor and Notre Dame.

Moreover, by and large, these professors are committed to pursuing their vocations as scholars, as indicated by broad faculty participation in CCCU faculty grant programs and faculty institutes. For example, over the past two decades, fifty professors have participated in the CCCU's "Bridging Two Cultures of Science and Humanities" grant program; nearly ninety have received CCCU Networking Grants to support collaborative research, and over two hundred have participated in the CCCU New Faculty Institute.

As one provost put it, "I am optimistic about the future of Christian scholarship because our newer faculty are highly motivated to contribute their voices and perspectives to their scholarly fields. They love discovery and dissemination as a celebration and expression of gratitude for God's vast creativity."<sup>3</sup> These professors expect institutional support for their scholarship, and by and large our institutions are getting creative in finding ways to do that.

If Christian universities are going to continue nurturing Christian scholarship in the future, two guiding principles will be important. The first is flexibility. Faculty hiring reflects student enrollment, and enrollment trends are clearly in the direction of health sciences, engineering and technology, and professional fields such as business and education—not philosophy and history. To take two disciplines as examples: From 2006 to 2016, the number of CCCU students majoring in history declined twenty-five percent, from 845 to 674. At the same time, the number of engineering majors more than doubled from 425 to 940.<sup>4</sup>

As Christian universities develop academic programming and hire more faculty in these professional areas, our schools will need to be more flexible in their understanding of what constitutes scholarship worthy of institutional support. Many educators are familiar with Ernest Boyer's call for a new understanding of scholarship, put forth in his book *Scholarship Reconsidered*.<sup>5</sup> In addition to the traditional understanding of scholarship as the discovery of new information, Boyer described what he called the scholarship of teaching (what makes for effective teaching?), the scholarship of application (how do we apply new discoveries to real world problems?), and the scholarship of integration (what are the connections between different disciplines?).

With the growth of professional programs and the decline of the liberal arts, we are seeing more professors who practice the scholarship of teaching and application on our campuses. In the future, the most common type of scholarship from our institutions may not be a history of World War II but rather an engineering professor developing—and applying—a new technique for getting clean water to rural African villages.

Of course, this shift away from the humanities creates a more pressing need for conversations about what Christian scholarship means in these professionally-oriented disciplines. After a half-century of talking about it, we generally know what it means to think Christianly as historians—or at least how to debate the subject.<sup>6</sup> But future conversations will need to center around equipping our CCCU professors to probe the implications of Christianity for nursing, healthcare, and finance. Are we helping our faculty prepare for those conversations?

Second, along with flexibility, patience is integral to the nurturing of the evangelical mind in Christian universities. In his insightful book *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, historian Alan Kreider explores a question that has fascinated many historians: What explains the remarkable growth of the early church from a small, obscure sect to the dominant religion of the Late Roman Empire? His answer is both counterintuitive and provocative: in a word, *patience*.

Christians in the first couple of centuries, he argues, did not do missions, evangelism, or “outreach” as we tend to think of them today. Rather, they occupied themselves with daily habits of moral living, caring for the poor, and communal worship. Most significantly, they practiced patient endurance amid hardship and let God take care of growing the church. They believed that Christianity lived out patiently and in community would attract others who noticed their countercultural practices in work, sexual ethics, entertainment, charity, and nonviolence.

While these early Christians didn't build universities, their practice of patience is just as relevant to us today. Deep thinking, innovative research, and insights worth pursuing require time and consistent

habits of study and reflection to generate. Unfortunately, not just our society but our universities increasingly seem to lack for extended time for such things—which perhaps explains the popularity of a recent book, *The Slow Professor*.<sup>7</sup> One can whip up a lecture on supply-side economics fairly quickly, but generating insights that change the field of economics requires significant time and cannot be rushed. It requires extensive reading and study in the history of economics and society, as well as countless hours spent writing and re-writing that groundbreaking book or article. Quality scholarship requires patience.

### Conclusion

While reflecting on the subject of Christian scholarship, my attention was caught by the recent Calvin College alumni magazine featuring Alvin Plantinga on the cover. Plantinga recently received the Templeton Prize, which puts in him company with renowned figures such as Mother Theresa, Desmond Tutu, and the Dalai Lama.

In the interview with the college magazine, Plantinga recounts that he attended Harvard for his first year of college. Then he attended some summer lectures on ethics at Calvin by Henry Jellema and was so impressed that he transferred to Calvin. Later he spent much of his scholarly career at Calvin before moving to Notre Dame. Amid Plantinga’s teaching and other duties, Calvin College afforded him the freedom and the patience to generate new insights that revolutionized the discipline of philosophy.

Amid the challenges that exist, I hope that our institutions will follow Calvin’s example in encouraging and supporting professors in their scholarly pursuits. Doing so will require that administrators devote scarce resources to supporting faculty research and provide professors with the freedom to produce scholarship that is appropriate to their discipline. And above all, it will require professors who pursue their calling not just as teachers but as Christian writers, scientists, and artists. If that happens, then perhaps the evangelical mind in America will no longer be a scandal.

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<sup>1</sup> Two “collaborative partner” institutions of the CCCU, Baylor and Pepperdine, are outliers to some extent because of their significantly larger resource base compared to most CCCU member institutions.

<sup>2</sup> One of the more prominent recent examples concerned a professor at Wheaton College. See, for example, Elizabeth Dias, “Questions Linger After Tenured Wheaton College Professor Agrees to Leave,” *Time Magazine*, February 8, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Email interview with Carol Simon, provost of Whitworth University, July 19, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Data available from the Integrated Postsecondary Data System (<https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/>).

<sup>5</sup> Ernest Boyer, *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate*. (New York: Jossey-Bass, 1997).

<sup>6</sup> See, for one of many examples, John Fea, Jay Green, and Eric Miller, eds., *Confessing History: Explorations in Christian Faith and the Historian’s Vocation*. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber, *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016).