

The Great Commandment: A Paradigm for Christian Higher Education

David S. Dockery

David S. Dockery has been president of Union University, Jackson, Tennessee since 1996. He is the author or editor of several volumes, including *Southern Baptists and American Evangelicals: The Conversation Continues* and *Christian Scripture*, as well as numerous scholarly articles and reviews. This article is an edited version of his inaugural address.

The Challenges and Opportunities

We stand on the doorstep of a new century with great hopefulness, but also with an awareness of the difficult times in which we live. Values clarification will certainly rage into the third millennium. Educational issues will continue to be complicated by social problems such as poverty, the breakdown of families, and the ravages of crime, drugs, and AIDS.¹ Further, James Mecklenburger, Director of the Institute for the Transfer of Technology to Education, has loudly proclaimed that “Information Technology is the most powerful educational force since chalk.”² Others view such technology less positively.³ Nonetheless, the high technology age is here, bringing both blessing and curse.

Clearly, we must remember that High Tech is not enough. High Touch is mandatory for followers of Jesus. Jesus, the master teacher, first called His followers to be “with Him” before He sent them on mission. Christian higher education must take advantage of new opportunities that facilitate learning, break down traditional barriers, and provide new and powerful information. High Tech may be a useful servant, but it makes a horrible master. More important questions even than the use of technology loom before us today. We must determine the purpose of education, or more specifically, the purpose of Christian education, as well as the common values we want to share with the next generation.⁴

The restlessness that characterizes so much of Western society stems in part from the enormous changes in our coun-

try and in our world. Leith Anderson says these changes “promise to be greater than the invention of the printing press, greater than the Industrial Revolution.”⁵ At the heart of these paradigmatic changes is the fact that truth, morality, and interpretation are being ignored, if not rejected outright. Therefore, Christian higher education faces some formidable challenges.⁶ Throughout education and culture, the very existence of objective truth is being challenged. We observe this phenomena in the academy in the post structuralism of Lyotard,⁷ the deconstructionism of Derrida,⁸ the radical subjectivism of Foucault,⁹ and the reader-focused hermeneutic of Stanley Fish.¹⁰ It is even found in popular culture, exemplified in the lyrics of the country music group Diamond Rio, who sing that “it’s all interpretation, if you want to know the truth you have to read between the lines.”¹¹ A normative view of truth and a Christian world view are rejected or devalued, seemingly lost in our contemporary culture.

Recently a high profile culture-watcher observed this trend’s impact on Christians by noting that “an unbelievably small proportion of believers have what is called a Christian worldview . . . and because most Christians don’t think like Christians, they can’t act like Christians. Because they don’t act like Christians they can’t have much impact on the world in which they live.”¹²

The Call: Toward a Great Commandment Model

Christian higher education has an op-

portunity at this unique time in history to step forward as a leader in the larger field of higher education to prepare students to enter the changing world of the twenty-first century. In order to answer this call we must commit to the words of Jesus found in Matthew 22:36-40. Here we are told to love God with our hearts, minds, and souls, and to love others completely. Jesus' words command a wholehearted emotional, volitional, and cognitive devotion to God. This kind of "love" for God will then result in obedience to all He has commanded.¹³ These words provide the foundation for our mission in our changing, postmodern world.

The purpose of Christian institutions is to educate students to be prepared for whatever vocation God has called them, to equip them with the competencies necessary to think Christianly and to perform skillfully in the world, and to teach them to be servant leaders who impact the world as change agents based on a full-orbed Christian world and life view. In other words, we are called to be Great Commandment schools.

The first and greatest commandment includes loving God with our minds. As T. S. Eliot writes:

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.¹⁴

Learning to think Christianly impacts our homes, our businesses, our health care agencies, our schools, our social structures, our recreational activities, and, yes, our churches too. To love God with our minds means that we depart from secu-

lar mindsets in the way we live and love, the way we worship and serve, the way we work to earn our livelihood, and the way we learn and teach.

As we prepare to enter the twenty-first century we need more than just new and novel ideas and enhanced programs; we need distinctively Christian thinking, the kind of tough-minded thinking that results in distinctly different action. To achieve this end we need to hear afresh the significance of Jesus' words for us. We must, as T. S. Eliot has written, "be able to think in Christian categories."¹⁵ To do so means we must be able to define and hold to a world-and-life view grounded in the truth of God's revelation to us. It means seeing life and learning from a Christian vantage point; it means thinking with the mind of Christ. This process involves the whole of our human personality. Our mind is to be renewed, our emotions purified, our conscience kept clear, and our will surrendered to God's will. Applying the Great Commandment entails all that we know of ourselves being committed to all that we know of God.¹⁶

Twentieth-Century Hostility Towards Christian Thought

Never before in America has it been so important to awaken our institutions of higher learning to the significance of these words of Jesus. As George Marsden has suggested in his groundbreaking work, *The Soul of the American University*, we have moved from a time of "Protestant establishment" to one of "established unbelief."¹⁷ Russell Chandler adds that colleges and universities affiliated with mainline Protestant denominations are in for a hard time, due to both budget blues and an erosion into secularization. He adds that the slide into secularism is already well under

way and destined to be virtually complete by 2001.¹⁸ Mark Schwehn contends that the modern university has forgotten its spiritual foundations.¹⁹ Similarly, University of Chicago professor Dorothy Bass laments that most church-affiliated colleges and universities have become so totally secularized that it is hard to know a church-affiliated college when you see one.²⁰ While some experts are not as pessimistic, it is generally the case that higher education in America has shifted from a foundational vantage point where the knowledge of God provides the context for all forms of human knowledge to one that is hostile to Christianity. Today the focus of the university tends to be one in which the “uses of the university are merely for better knowledge and higher skills.”²¹

Indeed, Clark Kerr, former President of the University of California, has proudly noted that the vision of Christian higher education has been shattered forever, with empirical thinking taking the place of moral philosophy, and research the place of teaching.²² What Clark Kerr wrongly sees as positive gains are more rightly interpreted by Bill Readings as signs of decay. In fact, Readings declares that the university has become an autonomous bureaucratic institution—a ruined institution—without a grand narrative of culture to carry out its work.²³ I contend that, regardless of the directionless musings of postmoderns like Derrida, Lyotard, and others, there *is* a grand metanarrative, a larger story, that can shape our thinking and learning. It is found in the the Great Commandment.

Sadly, the problems with the modern university have moved beyond the loss of moral philosophy, or the rise of autonomous bureaucracies, or even the “political correctness” of the academic elite. The problem is deeper. We have lost the “uni”

in university. We have lost sight of the foundational questions.

Toward A Recovery of Christian Foundations

In the late 1800’s nothing matched the financial and political dominance of the railroad. Trains completely dominated the transportation industry of the United States, for they moved both people and goods throughout the country. Then a new discovery came along—the automobile—and, incredibly, the railroad industry failed to take advantage of its unique position to own its development. The automotive revolution was happening all around them, but they failed to use industry dominance to take hold of a new opportunity. Tom Peters points out the reason: they did not understand the business they were in. They thought they were in the train business, when in fact they were in the transportation business. Time passed them by, as did opportunity. They could not see their real purpose. They failed to ask themselves the key foundational questions.

For the railroad industry, foundational questions would have included, “What business are we in?” “What is the goal of our efforts?” Answering such questions would have led them to realize they were not really in the railroad business at all, but in the transportation business. Their ultimate goal was not the preservation of a particular system of transportation, but transportation itself.²⁴

A more contemporary example of this problem was pointed out by Ron Pobuda of the National Audiovisual Association, who wrote, “If *Sports Illustrated* magazine understood it was in the sports information business, not the publishing business, then two decades ago we would have had the

Sports Illustrated Channel, not ESPN."²⁵

Such is the power of a foundational question: it gets underneath momentary methods, tools and fads, thereby keeping an organization focused on its most basic identity and objective.

The Primary Purpose of Christian Higher Education

Our primary purpose is not just the educating of business students, or nursing students, or art students, or music students, or science students to the latest fads. Nor is it to remain bound to certain methods of delivering this information. Our goal is not just the teaching of certain subject matter. Our mission is both broader and more basic than that.

In recent days, David Damrosch, Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University in New York City, has penned a sane and sound analysis of the specific challenges facing higher education at the conclusion of the twentieth century. His work, entitled *We Scholars: Changing the Culture of the University*, proposes several reforms meant to alter the culture of American academic life.²⁶ He recognizes the changes that have been brought about in higher education with the rise, expansion, and multiplication of disciplines. Yet he proposes that the problem we face is not necessarily increasing academic specialization. Rather, it is the lack of interrelatedness between the disciplines. This unwillingness to relate disciplines to one another has resulted in a fragmentation of knowledge. *The fragmentation of knowledge should alarm all committed to Christian higher education, for it strikes at the foundation of our purpose!!*

Damrosch calls for an interdisciplinary community approach to teaching and research, simultaneously generalizing and

specializing. He discourages the isolationism of the academy and urges that the university reshape itself by working in concert even across established field boundaries. He rightly recognizes that disciplinary fragmentation dates from decisions made a century ago when the modern American university assumed its current form. Damrosch's suggestions are noble and helpful, but shortsighted. They fail to address the most important aspect of the problem, which is not specialization, but a specialization brought on by a fragmentation of knowledge. This atomization has resulted in a false dichotomy between the life of the mind and the life of faith. It is here that Christian institutions seeking to put into practice the implications of the Great Commandment can enter this important conversation.

I would suggest that loving God with our minds, thinking Christianly, points us to a unity of knowledge, a seamless whole, because all true knowledge flows from the One Creator to His one creation. Thus, specific bodies of knowledge relate to each other not just because scholars work together in community, not just because interdisciplinary work broadens our knowledge, but because all truth is God's truth, composing a single universe of knowledge.²⁷

Becoming a Great Commandment college does not mean blurring disciplinary boundaries—not at all! It means taking varying and at times seemingly conflicting approaches and traditions, and seeking to interpret and explain subject matter under the Lordship of the Creator God, the revealer of all truth. If we can learn to integrate faith thoroughly within our various disciplines, drawing on the long Christian tradition to do so, we can restore coherence to learning.

Then education will not only mean the

passing on of content to our students, but also the shaping of character. Then it will move toward the development and construction of a convictional world and life view by which we can see, learn, and interpret the world from the vantage point of God's revelation. We must therefore seek to build a Christian liberal arts university where men and women can be introduced to an understanding and appreciation of God, His creation and grace, and humanity's place of privilege and responsibility in God's world.

Understanding and Appreciating our Heritage

It might be helpful to realize that the goal of Christian education, rightly understood for the past two thousand years, has been this faith and knowledge integration. The starting point for this integration has rested on the foundation of the words of Jesus' Great Commandment and the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Scriptures, which reminds us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, wisdom, and understanding (Pr 1:7; Ps 111:10; Job 28:28). Thus, the beginning point for thinking, learning, and teaching is our reverence before God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth.

The search for knowledge, the quest for truth—phrases so familiar as to be clichés in education—must not be uttered carelessly. For when we seek knowledge and truth from the Christian perspective we begin with God who is omniscient, God who is truth. This foundation has produced a legacy of those committed to a passion for learning based on the presupposition that all truth is God's truth. Thus, as Christians related together in a learning community, faculty, students, staff, and administrators must seek to take ev-

ery thought captive to Christ and to love God with all our minds.²⁸

Perhaps Justin Martyr, a philosopher in the second century (100-165 A.D.), was the first in post-apostolic times to articulate the need for faith and learning. He said whatever has been uttered aright by any person in any place belongs to us Christians.²⁹ In Alexandria in the next century both Clement and Origin instructed their converts not only in doctrine but in science, literature, and philosophy.³⁰ In the fifth century, Augustine stated that every true and good Christian should understand that wherever we may find truth, it is the Lord's.³¹

This legacy may be traced across the centuries and in most every culture, for wherever the Gospel has been received, the academy and Christian learning have followed. This legacy can be traced through Erasmus, Luther, Calvin, Knox, Melancthon, and Comenius to the founding of major institutions in this country.³² When commenting on the place of the humanities John Calvin states that

If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despise it wherever it shall appear, unless we wish to dishonor the Spirit of God. For by holding the gifts of the Spirit in slight esteem, we condemn and reproach the Spirit Himself.³³

Calvin's contemporaries, Luther and Erasmus, though with different emphases, underscored Calvin's convictions. Erasmus maintained that "all studies, philosophy, rhetoric, (and literature) are followed for this one object, that we know Christ and honor Him. This is the end of all learning and eloquence."³⁴ The commitment of Erasmus and Calvin to a program of studies so single-mindedly

Christ-centered places them among the forerunners in the integration of faith with all living and learning. Their sense of wholeness in studies and teaching, in art and science, in ethics and etiquette, in politics and government, provides a striking model for us.

Today's Christian colleges and universities must seek to become heirs of this great legacy. We must move toward becoming Great Commandment schools by seeking to understand and cherish God's revelation and holy creation in our discipline-related explorations.

The Great Commandment: Applications

Being a Great Commandment institution means more than the integration of *faith* and *learning*, it involves the integration of *faith* and *living*. Jesus tells us to apply our love for God with heart, mind, and soul by loving others. Divine love issues in interpersonal love. Such application affects work and school, home and church, politics and play. It impacts the most elemental aspects of our daily lives, for all thinking must be accompanied by action.

This means we must seek to serve one another by demonstrating the love of God to students, colleagues, and others who have contact with us. We must show love and respect for those we serve. We must attempt to work for their highest good. As Francis Schaeffer observes, "If we do not show love to each other the world has a right to question whether Christianity is true."³⁵ The implications of a commitment to the Great Commandment call for us to be student-friendly in our educational delivery systems and service-oriented in our dealing with faculty, staff, alumni, and other constituencies. At the heart of this commitment is the visible demonstration

of valuing one another. We must model the love and forgiveness of Christ.

Conclusion

Finally, what is required of us at this time is a commonly held vision—but not just any vision. We need vision shaped by commonly held values—values established on the Word of God, that lead to a firm commitment to Christ and His kingdom, values consistent with the worship of God and the love of learning.

We must constantly remind ourselves that we are *not* called just to be great private institutions of higher learning, but to be distinctive Christian colleges and universities. To start with the wrong goal is to run the wrong race.

Not too long ago a world-class runner was invited to compete in a road race in Connecticut. On the morning of the race, she drove from New York City, following the directions—or so she thought—given to her over the telephone. She got lost, stopped at a gas station, and asked for help. She knew that the race started in the parking lot of a shopping mall. The station attendant also knew of such a race scheduled just up the road and directed her there.

When she arrived she was relieved to see in the parking lot a modest number of runners preparing to compete—not as many as she had anticipated; and an easier race than she'd been led to expect. She hurried to the registration desk, announced herself, and was surprised by the race official's excitement at having so renowned an athlete show up for the race. No, they had no record of her entry, but if she'd hurry and put on her number she could make it before the race started. She ran, and naturally she won easily, finishing minutes ahead of the first male runner.

Only after the race, when there was no envelope containing her sizable prize and performance money, did she discover that the event she had run was not the race to which she had been invited. That race was being held several miles farther up the road in another town. She had gone to the wrong starting line, run the wrong course, and missed her chance to win a valuable prize.³⁶ We all must run the right race. As the author of Hebrews says, we must run with perseverance the race marked out for us with our eyes focused on Jesus (Heb 12:1-2).

We therefore need a vision established on the values of the priority of worship and service in all aspects of life. This vision must seek to develop a generation of students who can be agents of reconciliation to a factious church in a hurting and broken world. Let us strive together to build great Christian liberal arts universities established upon commitment to the coherence of knowledge and God-revealed truth. Let us submit to the Lordship of Christ and exemplify the Great Commandment in all that we do.³⁷ I believe a Great Commitment to the Great Commandment's implications and applications will produce a Great University, something which can *only* be accomplished by God's Grace and for His Glory.

ENDNOTES

¹ Jack Jones, "Slouching Toward the Millennium," *Los Angeles Times Magazine* (Dec. 24, 1989) 8.

² See James A. Mecklenburger, "The New Revolution." *Business Week* (special advertising section), ED23, (no date); also James D. Meindl, ed., *Brief Lessons in High Technology: Understanding the End of This Century to Capitalize on the Next* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Alumni Association, 1989).

³ Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Bluff*

(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990); Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York: Penguin, 1986); *idem.*, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage, 1993).

⁴ See Ronald H. Nash, *The Closing of the American Heart: What's Really Wrong With America's Schools* (Dallas: Probe, 1990).

⁵ Leith Anderson, *A Church for the 21st Century* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1992) 17.

⁶ See Gene Edward Veith, *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1994).

⁷ E.g. Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1984).

⁸ E.g. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G. C. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1976).

⁹ E.g. Michael Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *Power/Knowledge*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980).

¹⁰ E.g. Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1980).

¹¹ Diamond Rio, "It's All in Your Head," *Diamond Rio IV* (1996).

¹² George Barna, as cited by David Winfrey, "Barna's Polls Find Reason to Rejoice and Worry," *Western Recorder* (September 17, 1996) 1.

¹³ See Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman, 1992) 335.

¹⁴ T. S. Eliot, *Christianity and Culture* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1940) 22.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ John R. W. Stott, *The Contemporary Christian* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992) 114-26.

¹⁷ George Marsden, *The Soul of the American University* (Oxford Univ. Press: New

- York, 1994).
- ¹⁸ Russell Chandler, *Racing Toward 2001* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 108.
- ¹⁹ Mark Schwehn, as cited in Daniel Cattau, "Education: A Problem Could Be a Solution," *Progressions*, A Lilly Endowment Occasional Report, 2:1 (1990) 20.
- ²⁰ Dorothy Bass, as cited in Carol Elrod, "Church Historian Analyzes Causes of Mainline Church Malaise," *Religious News Service* (November 15, 1988); also see similar comments in James D. Hunter, *Evangelicalism: The Coming Generation* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987).
- ²¹ Clark Kerr, *The Uses of the University* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1995).
- ²² *Ibid.* Kerr opposes the classic dream of John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (1873; rpt. South Bend, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1982).
- ²³ Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1996).
- ²⁴ See Thomas J. Peters and Robert Waterman, Jr., *In Search of Excellence* (New York: Warner, 1982).
- ²⁵ Cited by Roger Dow and Susan Cook, *Turned On* (New York: Harper Business, 1996) 6.
- ²⁶ David Damrosch, *We Scholars: Changing the Culture of the University* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1995).
- ²⁷ See Arthur F. Holmes, *All Truth is God's Truth* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1977).
- ²⁸ See D. Bruce Lockerbie, *A Passion for Learning* (Chicago: Moody, 1994).
- ²⁹ Justin Martyr, *Second Apology*, XIII; see Harry L. Poe, *The Gospel and Its Meaning* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 90-95.
- ³⁰ Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies*, I. 13.; see David S. Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation Then and Now* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992) 75-102.
- ³¹ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*; see Poe, *The Gospel and Its Meaning*, 67-70.
- ³² See Marsden, *Soul of the American University*; also Kelly Monroe, *Finding God at Harvard* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996).
- ³³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 2, 2:15.
- ³⁴ Cited in D. Bruce Lockerbie, *Thinking and Acting Like a Christian* (Portland: Mutnomah, 1989) 92-93.
- ³⁵ Francis Schaeffer, *The Church Before the Watching World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1971).
- ³⁶ As reported by Lockerbie, *Thinking and Acting Like A Christian*.
- ³⁷ See Millard J. Erickson, *The Evangelical Heart and Mind* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993); George R. Knight, *Philosophy and Education* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews Univ. Press, 1989); John R. W. Stott, *Involvement* (Old Tappan: Revell, 1984); Mark A. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).