

A Vision for Christ-centered Higher Education

Toward the Development of a Philosophy of Education at Cedarville University

Cedarville University is a Christ-centered learning community equipping students for lifelong leadership and service through an education marked by excellence and grounded in biblical truth. This mission affects our philosophy of education, including the way faculty members conduct research, practice collegiality, and carry out instruction.

As a university comprised of multiple schools, containing a variety of academic disciplines and areas of research, Cedarville will carry out its mission through a conversation involving a mutual sharing among the various disciplines, both on Cedarville's campus and within the academy at large. For example, those engaged in biblical and theological studies will gain hermeneutical insight to exercise more critical discernment for biblical interpretation and theological reflection from conversation with those involved in the study of human communication within and across cultures and social strata, the study of artistic expression, and the study of literary forms and theories. Furthermore, those preparing students for professional careers such as those in nursing, business, and education will seek to educate their students as complete persons through collaboration with colleagues in the humanities and social sciences.

As a Christ-centered university with a commitment to the authority of Christian Scripture, we recognize the following principles:

Biblical Authority

The Bible, being the inspired, infallible, and inerrant Word of God, has ultimate authority over all human constructs. This recognition affects the ways we approach the hermeneutical task in general, the more specific theological tasks that flow from the practice of hermeneutics, and our specific theological formulations at Cedarville University.

First, we recognize that when we derive our hermeneutical principles and practices from our Christian identity and faithful adherence to the authority of Scripture, our practice of hermeneutics will be a full-bodied, soul-engaged, heart and life-transforming encounter that fully involves the interpreter and interpreting community. God does not speak into a vacuum, nor does God aim merely to inform, but eagerly desires to give life, to transform the heart and mind, to redeem the lost, to strengthen the downcast, and to rebuke and restore the wayward. A hermeneutical approach to the Bible that downplays these elements falls short of a faithful understanding of the Bible, because the hermeneutical

task must seek to fulfill God's ultimate aim in Scripture, not just the goal of cognitive textual mastery.

Furthermore, all Bible interpretation is culturally and socially situated. Our situatedness is in accordance with the design and plan of God and is not an unfortunate state of affairs. God desires to transform actual cultures, communities, and individuals. Therefore, the truth of the Word of God must be read by actual people in actual circumstances rather than abstract interpreters in abstracted or timeless and supra-cultural situations (an oxymoron). The Bible, then, must be interpreted not only with sensitivity to its variety of literary genre, but also with sensitivity to the historical and theological contexts of both the original text and its present readers.

In addition, we recognize that theology is a second-order discipline. In other words, the task of theology is to reflect upon the intersection of the authoritative biblical text, our tradition, and the world in which we live. Reflecting upon these relationships, we gain wisdom for faithfully embodying Christian identity to the glory of God in Christ. To that end, we affirm the importance of biblical theology and historical theology for coming to grips with how Christian discipleship has been shaped throughout Scripture and at various points in the history of the people of God.

Finally, we confidently affirm our doctrinal statement as our confessional stance, our starting point for exploring God's Word and world. We also recognize, however, the authority of the Word of God over our statements of doctrine or theology. While we believe that the doctrinal statement of Cedarville University is a faithful articulation of biblical truth that marks our identity as a conservative, evangelical institution of higher education, we also recognize that it is a deductive human construct. It remains subject to refinement in light of a more faithful understanding of biblical truth. Consequently, while maintaining our commitment to the doctrinal statement, we recognize that Scripture judges, reforms, redeems, and transforms our doctrine and must always do so for us to remain faithful to the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ. Therefore, we recognize that all of our theological efforts are carried out in a spirit of humility and gracious acceptance of diversity within the context of our confessional unity. We affirm that we have both academic freedom and Christian liberty to engage in conversation with the diversity of perspectives possible within the Christian tradition. We do not consider legitimate differences of biblical interpretation to be divisions on the essentials of the faith.

Academic Freedom

Education in a comprehensive university setting demands academic freedom. A liberal arts education means the "stretching of minds and imaginations, the unceasing stimulus to honest inquiry, the appropriation of a cultural heritage, the transmission of ideas and values, and exposure to the frontiers of learning." It requires freedom to grow, freedom to gain stimulation for creative work, and freedom to provoke others to think deeply. It demands "freedom to meet the great minds of the past and present, to interact rigorously with their ideas and weigh their values, freedom to explore new horizons and press back the frontiers of learning" (Holmes, *The Idea of a Christian College*, 61-62). Therefore,

we will foster an atmosphere of trust and mutual blessing that encourages such freedom and avoid an atmosphere of suspicion and fear that smothers such freedom. We recognize that the task of a Christ-centered, comprehensive university is constructive, far more than it is defensive. Our task as educators in a constantly-changing, cultural and social situation requires that we do not simply give students pre-packaged sets of answers to anticipated questions so that they are conditioned to respond in certain ways. Rather, while helping students set a firm foundation in the truth, we educate students to demonstrate independence and to exhibit creativity of mind in fashioning new skills and techniques, as well as new patterns of thought. At Cedarville University we will educate students to have a disciplined understanding of their heritage, but also to exercise creativity, logical rigor, and self-critical honesty, all within a biblical framework (Holmes, *The Idea of a Christian College*, 46).

Academic freedom, then, is the liberty to explore the truth in a biblically faithful, “responsible fashion, to think, even to make mistakes and correct them; it is the freedom of the teacher to enlist students in the same quest, and to equip them carefully for its exacting demands; it is the freedom of the student to think for herself and to disagree on reasonable grounds with what her teachers say” (Holmes, *The Idea of a Christian College*, 69).

Academic freedom, of course, is not synonymous with autonomy. At Cedarville, as a Christ-centered learning community, our shared Christian identity sets boundaries on the exercise of academic freedom, because good scholarship in Christian community is scholarship in service of others, not scholarship in service of one’s own agenda. For the sake of others, we must exercise discernment regarding what we teach, write, perform, or participate in. We equally must exercise discernment in our use of methods of pedagogy, research, performance, and communication. But the boundaries for the exercise of our academic freedom set by our Christian identity are directive more than restrictive. They help us truly to be a Christ-centered community of scholars, colleagues, educators, and students.

Academic freedom implies that faith and learning at Cedarville University is graciously and reasonably presented. Like love, faith cannot be forced. In addition, we will be just as, if not more, interested in helping students grapple with issues for themselves in light of their heritage of Christian faith than instructing them in the correct set of answers. Finally, we must keep in mind, that while Scripture is the final rule of faith and practice, not all of the truth about everything is fully revealed in it and our understanding of Scripture is subject to refinement and revision based on careful study (Holmes, *The Idea of a Christian College*, 62-63).

Developing a Christian Worldview

This vision of education will manifest itself in our task of helping students to develop a Christian worldview in submission to Scripture. Such an approach has several characteristics.

First, the development of a Christian worldview will involve integration. Since a worldview is holistic, it involves coming to grips with all of life through engagement with the world. It is a systematic understanding and appraisal of life, and none of the academic disciplines is exempted from contact with it.

Second, a worldview is exploratory, not a closed system that is worked out once-for-all. It is unfinished, not final and timeless. It is an endless undertaking that is always the vision of a possibility. It is a framework for engaging the world that is subject to revision and refinement in conversation with, at least, Scripture, the world, a variety of academic disciplines, and tradition.

Third, a Christian worldview is continually shaped in joyful and humble conversation with other Christian traditions. Diverse points of view exist among Christians, not only because of theological differences, but also because we explore Christian perspectives on the world of thought at different points and by different paths and with different concerns and backgrounds. Consequently, academic freedom and intellectual honesty are absolutely essential. In addition, while being fully committed to our doctrinal statement, our doctrinal commitments will always be provisional and we will hold them with humility, always conversing with other traditions to be constantly growing in faithfulness to God.

Fourth, a Christian worldview is confessional and perspectival. As a confessional stance, our worldview is the starting point for engaging the world for the glory of God. There are good and sufficient reasons for our strong commitment to this confessional stance, which is our agreed-upon set of beliefs, attitudes, and values, that is, the perspective from which we look at life (Holmes, *The Idea of a Christian College*, 58-59).

Implications

This vision for education has practical implications for research by faculty members, collegial conduct among faculty members, and the manner in which education is carried out in the classroom.

1. Because Cedarville University is a Christ-centered learning community, we will model for our students our roles as fellow learners and fellow students, joyfully, faithfully, and eagerly exploring God's world and God's Word in order to grow in faithful and humble discipleship to Jesus Christ.
2. Because each member of the faculty has expertise in a given area of study, we will practice Christian, scholarly collegiality by showing deference to the judgment of our fellow faculty members in areas that lie outside of our individual specializations. We will choose to operate from an impulse of trust in our relationships and seek to learn from one another.
3. Because Christian scholarship is most fruitful in an atmosphere of trust and mutual blessing, we will resist efforts to foster fear and suspicion among

colleagues, in our departments, and across campus. We will be direct, charitable, open, and honest in our communications with one another.

4. Because of our view of the relationship between biblical authority and liberal arts education, we will not require an *a priori* commitment to any one epistemological theory. We recognize the reality of the world under the Lordship of Christ and the ability of humans to recognize it for what it is, but we do not require allegiance to any one theory for articulating the precise nature of this relationship.
5. Because we affirm the authority of Scripture over our doctrinal formulations, we will allow diversity within our confessional unity, recognizing that our doctrinal framework allows for some measure of disagreement. That is, we will not require that our faculty members maintain a greater specificity of belief in areas where our doctrinal statement is intentionally silent.
6. Because of the inherent biblical and educational value of diversity, including the variety of gifts and experiences that can be brought to the educational task by women and minorities, and because we seek to prepare students for faithful and fruitful involvement in a diverse world, we will actively seek to hire women and minorities to teach across the full range of classes offered by the University.
7. Because we value humility and honesty in the educational task, we will model good Christian scholarship in our teaching and research by endeavoring to represent with charity, fairness, humility, and accuracy all views that are presented in class materials, presentations, or publications. We will treat opposing points of view with respect. We will not engage in negative scholarship that only tears down without providing positive alternatives.
8. Because we recognize that education and research is the pursuit of truth under the sovereignty of God, we will seek to be in active dialogue with the larger academy and the larger Christian community in order to benefit from the expertise and perspectives of others outside of our specific faith tradition. We also will actively seek to integrate truth from other disciplines into our scholarship and teaching.
9. Because our task is an educational one, not one of indoctrination, we will strive to make our classrooms places where our students can ask tough questions, admit doubts, and wrestle with uncertainties. We will work with them through this process, providing guidance and equipping them with the necessary critical skills. We will, however, resist the temptation to give pat answers, thereby short-circuiting the learning process.
10. Because we recognize that “freedom in the classroom” involves weighty responsibilities, we will carry out our duties as teachers and scholars in a spirit of biblical faithfulness and loyalty to Christ, seeking to cultivate lives of faith resulting in Christian virtues such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. We will not manifest in

ourselves or tolerate in our students attitudes such as rebellion, cynicism, distrust, or disrespect.

11. Because we welcome diversity within our confessional unity, we will use our classrooms as arenas of excellence in education, conducting ourselves with Christian charity while exploring God's world for God's glory and our good. We will not use our classrooms as ideological battle-grounds, using our educational platforms as opportunities to engage in one-sided critiques of colleagues, other courses offered in the University, or other points of view.
12. Because we recognize that our Christian worldviews are exploratory, not closed systems worked out once-for-all, we will welcome philosophical and theological diversity within our confessional unity among our faculty members. While prizing unity in the faculty, we will not require uniformity among its members. We likewise will expect the same from our students and graduates. Consequently, within the boundaries of our confessional unity, we will work to equip our graduates to work within or attend a wide array of churches, graduate schools, or seminaries.

Sources

Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant, 1978)

Steven Garber, *The Fabric of Faithfulness* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1996)

Arthur F. Holmes, *Building the Christian Academy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001)

Arthur F. Holmes, *The Idea of a Christian College* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986)

Arthur F. Holmes, *The Making of a Christian Mind: A Christian World View & The Academic Enterprise* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1985)

Richard T. Hughes, *How Christian Faith Can Sustain the Life of the Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001)

J. P. Moreland, *Love Your God with All Your Mind* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1997)

James Sire, *Habits of the Mind: Intellectual Life As a Christian Calling* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000)