

The Case for Christian Higher Education and Ottawa University

In this paper, I would like to address two important questions. The first question is why Christians have historically believed that higher education is important in the life of the church and beyond and why it remains so in this day. The second has to do with how Ottawa University lives out its stated mission of providing the highest quality liberal arts education in “a caring, Christ-centered community of grace” and why it, specifically, is worthy of consideration and support. Let me take these questions in order.

To answer the first, it seems appropriate to call upon Scripture, for if an institution and its mission is to be rooted in the Christian faith, it is only logical that one would look to the foundations of that faith for some guidance. There are many references to the need for and desirability of learning and education in many parts of the Bible. Here are a few:

From the book of Proverbs, 1.2-5, “To know wisdom and instruction. To understand words of insight. To receive instruction in wise dealing, in righteousness, justice and equity. To give prudence to the simple, and knowledge and discretion to the youth. Let the wise hear and increase in learning, and the one who understands obtain guidance”.

From Proverbs 24.3-7, “By wisdom a house is built, and by understanding it is established. By knowledge the rooms are filled with all precious and pleasant riches. A wise man is full of strength, and a man of knowledge enhances his might”.

And finally, from John 8.32, “And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free”.

The last verse from John actually appears in Latin (“*veritas vos liberabit*”) on the great seal of Ottawa University. This verse undergirds our long-held belief at Ottawa University that the quest for truth is noble and, indeed, critical. That free and open inquiry leads to wisdom. And, importantly, that wisdom is more powerful than mere knowledge. It is a basic tenet of Christianity itself that servants of Christ be *wise persons* in order that they might be better able to respond to Christ’s great calling, for His purposes, for their own lives, and for society.

Throughout much of its history, Christianity has looked to some form of higher education to strengthen and secure its churches through the preparation and education of qualified clergy and laypersons. The first medieval institutions generally considered to be universities (of the European variety) were established in Italy, France and England in the late 11th and the 12th centuries for the study of arts, law, and medicine in addition to theology. All of them evolved from much older Christian cathedral schools and monastic schools. So, the very concept of a university was born not in a secular setting, but in settings controlled by and oriented to the church. The history of higher education as we know it today in America was from the beginning a *Christian* higher education.

One of the key assertions of early Puritanism was that laypersons in addition to clergy should possess the ability to read and understand the Bible and to understand and interpret theology. Indeed, this very premise was the foundation for Harvard College, the first denominational college in the English colonies, established in 1636. Over the course of the next two hundred years, nearly nine hundred colleges were founded throughout the United States on similar premises by many different denominations, many of which did not survive much past the Civil War. Then, as now, the logic was simple but powerful. God's call is to be unto Christ, for Christ, and one in Christ. The church is that institution ordained by Christ to bring all unto Him. A poorly informed, undereducated clergy and laity fundamentally weaken the church. A weak church answers the Call weakly. Thus, at its core, the essential *institutional* argument for church supported colleges and universities is that they strengthen the church itself.

The colleges and universities which were founded in those earlier days became more and more interested in serving a broader constituency than members of particular denominations or faith groups as these institutions were swept up by a variety of environmental forces. These included industrial development, geographical expansion and settlement of the American continent, major shifts in conventional mores involving gender and race, the expansion of the upper class which regarded higher education as a symbol of status, the emergence of the professions and the need for vocational preparation, and many other forces. The passage of the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862 which helped to establish more than 70 land-grant colleges, none of which were church related or oriented, changed the higher education landscape in some very fundamental ways. No longer was a young man or woman limited to church-related institutions as the sole source for a legitimate higher education.

Partially in response to the social winds which have buffeted them and due also to significantly increased competitive forces for students and funding, a more hostile governmental and regulatory environment, and a reduction in direct support from denominations and churches themselves, many previously church related institutions have succumbed to what Robert Benne has called "relentless secularization". This secular trend has resulted in a much smaller number of institutions today with a crystal clear focus on their Christian mission. This has led to the classic chicken or egg debate which persists today: Did these colleges leave the church, or did the churches leave the colleges?

Fortunately, neither chicken nor egg applies to Ottawa University. Despite a steady and precipitous decline in church funding over the past decade as the denomination confronts its own financial exigencies, our institution seeks a closer and more mutually beneficial relationship with the American Baptists and is currently enjoying a genuine renewal in that regard. We take very seriously our responsibilities to the church and are working hard to open even more venues for mutual benefit.

"My son [daughters, too], eat honey, for it is good, and the drippings of the honeycomb are sweet to your taste. Know that wisdom is such to your soul. If you find it, there will be a future, and your hope will not be cut off." This passage from Proverbs 24.13-14 takes us to the personal or individual argument for Christian higher education. Interestingly, it is a case very similar to the one even the most calloused non-believers make for the liberal arts. As we seek to

prepare our students for their futures, the “drippings of the honeycomb” have to do with the notion of wholeness--of living a life wisely and richly balanced.

Proponents of the liberal arts and those of Christian higher education who sometimes see each other at odds have much more in common than they might believe. Both are ultimately committed to the development of all of the dimensions that make us whole people: intellectual, physical, vocational, relational, aesthetic, and spiritual, although many in higher education take a less theological view of the latter by substituting general morality and “the common good” for fundamental Christian precepts. The very definition of an educated person is one who is thought to be “well-rounded” by having attended intentionally to his/her total development through an exposure to the breadth of a strong liberal arts curriculum, a focused and dynamic preparation within a particular career path, and through continued exploration of important life questions including those related to one’s faith or belief system. This is often summarized as the “mind, body, spirit” paradigm that appears in many institutions and even religions. As we at Ottawa often say, we don’t teach our students what to think. We teach them how to think. And we work very hard to help them develop and articulate their values and beliefs so that their liberal arts studies and their professional preparation combine in some very powerful ways.

The secular-only crowd in higher education is often quite happy to suggest that such development is sufficient as long as it goes beyond the self to the broader aims of a free society—an argument as we have witnessed which can lead to heightened awareness of social justice issues in addition to personal growth. Christians, on the other hand, espouse the development of whole people for a purpose beyond themselves and even beyond the social justice objectives which are enough to satisfy the secularists. They believe we were created in God’s image as His crowning achievement. As such, reclaimed by Him through grace, we are called by The Great Commission to be more effective for His purposes. As Dallas Willard suggests in his book *Renovation of the Heart*, “For God’s purposes to prosper on this earth, it is required that His people think well”.

Thus, the purpose of a Christian higher education from the point of view of the individual can be summarized as developing all of the elements of our being as fully as possible in the example of Christ so that we might best serve Him, His church, and His people. In the bargain (and it is a great bargain), we are better able to lead lives of enlightened faith, exemplary service, inspired leadership, and personal significance as called for in the Ottawa University Vision Statement. This is a life that aspires to outcomes far beyond the trappings of earthly-defined success standards. In this construct, a liberal arts education is not only desirable, it is a necessary and powerful ingredient to the ultimately desired outcomes. More powerful for its breadth. Better focused in its purposes. And with the proper emphasis, responsive to Christ’s Call.

This sets the stage for us to turn to the second question to how it is that Ottawa University is conducting itself in pursuit of its mission as a Christian institution and why we believe so strongly that it is worthy of consideration by students, parents and supporters both within and outside the Church.

To begin, it is perhaps helpful to distinguish the respective roles of the church versus the university. While Ottawa University was born of the church and has an important role in serving

the church, we are not the church. The church and Ottawa University share some important purposes and precepts as has been discussed in this writing. While we are both called, we are called to different things. Oversimplifying, the fundamental role of the church is to attend to the spiritual foundation of its people and to bring them together for internal mutual support and Christ-inspired outreach to a suffering world. The fundamental role of the University, on the other hand, is broader (not more important) in one sense and a bit more narrow in another. Broader in that the University attends to vocational and intellectual development in addition to encouraging and nurturing spiritual formation. More narrow in that it is an accredited institution which awards degrees at the undergraduate and graduate levels and must do so in concert with numerous governmental, regulatory, and competitive standards.

In the face of the “relentless secularization” Benne describes, it appears that three rather distinct types of Christian colleges and universities have emerged.

One is that of the Christian college in “name only”. These are institutions whose leaders, boards, faculties and supporters have abandoned anything but perhaps a begrudging historical tie to the church denominations and purposes which founded them. They vary in degrees of intentionality from adamantly disclaiming their Christian heritage or anything like it to perhaps acknowledging a connection but with no emphasis in curriculum, hiring, or any other real or tangible evidence of Christian mission. These are the institutions to which many disaffected members of the church point to justify their lack of support for Christian higher education, including some within our American Baptist denomination.

The second, very much at the opposite extreme, are institutions which are emphatically and outwardly “Christian” in their orientation and which proclaim as their central hallmark their Christian purposes and mores. They may or may not be affiliated with a particular denomination, but all display the “trappings” of Christian higher education (at least as they perceive them) and can tend to be quite prescriptive in their approaches. They are frequently characterized by required chapel services, requirements for faculty and staff to sign oaths or statements of conviction, required evidence of Christian belief systems within the curriculum, and other outward signs of their commitment. Like many of the forbearers of the Christian higher educational institutions, they aim at providing a comfortable and supportive setting for those students who have been raised in their particular traditions and who seek the fellowship of like-minded believers while also attending in their own ways to their version of the liberal arts. This is quite appealing to some these days as they experience a world that appears not only relentlessly secular, but relentlessly hostile to their core belief systems.

While there are some constituencies who would like to define all Christian colleges in such ways, this more comfortable and prescriptive approach can have the effect of encouraging students to believe that they will be living and working in a homogenous world with folks just like them who believe everything they do. And, unfortunately, in some of these institutions, students or faculty with different backgrounds, belief systems, or lifestyles can be made to feel unwelcome. At Ottawa, there is a long and valued tradition of serving the underserved and of welcoming persons of great diversity in every respect. Our institutional ethos has almost always been an open and welcoming one, and open discourse and even dissent on numerous topics have been a valued part of our heritage. Here, there is absolutely a distinction between standing for

something and being narrow in that stance, just as is true in the denomination with which we are most closely affiliated.

So it is that Ottawa University has chosen a third path. I am intentionally not describing the type of institution we represent as in the middle or between the two others, because it is founded on a different stance entirely. Far from a middle of the road approach, this one is in many ways more intellectually demanding of an administration, board, staff and faculty. This is so because it is so much less convenient than the other two. It recognizes subtlety, nuance, and conflicts that are a part of everyday life and the imperfection which is inherent in the human condition and therefore in human organizations. As has been said, “the wiser we become, the less we realize we know”. This seeming paradox lives at the heart of institutions like ours that are filled with enough humility to disclaim any notion that they have arrived at just the right *gestalt* of the liberal arts and Christian calling or anything else approaching perfection. These institutions do not believe they possess the truth, but rather constantly seek it for themselves and their students. They do not find diversity in personhood, thought or action threatening. On the contrary, they find it necessary to a complete education.

The Ottawa’s of the world see themselves as institutions which are vital and extraordinarily relevant to a secular world, yet challenged every day by that world. They see themselves as responsible for educating and helping to develop every dimension of the whole person, including and very intentionally, the spiritual nourishment of their students. They see themselves as constantly seeking higher and better outcomes, not only for themselves but for the Christ they love and seek to serve. They are keenly and acutely aware of their shortcomings but are buoyed by the promise of grace so that they might at once be self-critical without self-loathing, just as they encourage their students to be. They are not afraid of even inconvenient truths and do not shy away from discussing, debating, or teaching alternative world views. In fact, as institutions in the act of actualizing, they are never satisfied that they have done all they can do for each and every student with whom they engage. Like the humans they serve, they are always becoming something new, something better, something more worthy.

These schools understand that there is power in a liberal arts education, but even more power in one which is guided by Christian mission and purposes. They believe there is power in demonstrating to their students through everyday action in and out of the classroom what the Christian faith is all about rather than merely teaching or proclaiming it. They see the presumed dichotomy between the liberal arts and Christian higher education as a false dichotomy, and reject out of hand the notion that they cannot thrive under one mission roof. Neither left nor right politically, socially, or philosophically, they seek to be centered. Centered in openness, caring, and commitment to the power of ideas. Centered in the example of Christ. They exist comfortably (and sometimes not so comfortably) in the freedom of knowing that they are not nor will they ever be omniscient, but that continued and freely encouraged inquiry is essential to becoming—as people and as institutions. As such, these institutions not only tolerate alternative views, but actually encourage that their students are systematically and rigorously exposed to them so that they—the students—come ultimately to their own conclusions and live out their lives authentically. They understand what Peter Drucker meant when he said that life is about asking the significant questions, and are highly skilled at framing them for students so that the term enlightened faith means just that.

This third type of Christian institution is the one I am privileged to lead at this time in its history. We at Ottawa University do not fall into either of the other categories I have delineated. In fact, we don't "fall" into any category. Rather, we are seeking to provide, as our mission statement suggests, "the highest quality liberal arts education in a caring, Christ-centered, community of grace". We recognize—often in the face of some pretty strident criticism from folks on one side or another—that our position is a tough one to stake out and maintain. It would be so much easier, but so much less effective and honest, for us to just give ourselves over to claiming to be one of those other types of Christian schools. Instead, we stand right here, right now, on ground that appears softer to some but that is actually harder and firmer in the long run. This is hallowed ground, as it carries within it the courage and openness to all that Christ encourages us to put there. It recognizes that as Christ Himself demonstrated throughout His journey, the easier road is not always the better road. It recognizes that Christ set a great table and that all—every human being of every race, color, or creed—is invited to join Him there—no matter who or what they have been or are.

No, it is not easy to be this third type of Christian educational institution, especially in these days where at times it seems that civil discourse and honest disagreement have all but disappeared. Nor am I here claiming that Ottawa University is always successful at living out its aspirational vision and mission, or even that every person who works here is equally committed to it. Alas, we too, are an imperfect organization. But there must be room in the world for such an institution, or we at Ottawa University would not be headed soon to the celebration of our 150th anniversary. We take some encouragement in this as we continuously challenge ourselves to do more for more and as we attempt to navigate our way through a new century.

So, now, we attempt to come to some summary closure on answering our two questions.

First, why should the church care about Ottawa University and be willing to support it?

One of our guiding principles states that Ottawa University is "Steadfastly Christian. Proudly American Baptist. Positively Open and Inclusive." These are strong reasons in and of themselves. But an even stronger reason is because we have historically and continue to provide thousands of highly skilled, well-educated men and women who serve in the clergy and as laypersons. These people are the recognized bedrock leaders of many congregations and other important organizations, without whose capabilities and servanthood these institutions would be much the poorer. As we have said, a weak church serves God's purposes weakly. A strong church needs a strong Ottawa University. Ours is a proud and proven history of undergirding the church and providing to the world graduates who are exemplary servants and inspired leaders. And may I dare say without any hint of arrogance intended, we are getting better at it every day and in every way at a time when both the church and the world desperately needs such people.

Second, why should parents and students of traditional age and adult learners concerned with their ongoing spiritual formation consider Ottawa University as the place to continue their education?

The answer is because through the grace of Christ we are very good at helping students to figure out who and what they (and God) wish for them to become, and even better at helping them to arrive at that “becoming”. We will help them understand the distinction between success and significance, and help them to achieve both in their lifetimes, as we are committed to educating them for the entirety of their lifetimes, not merely for a moment in time. What we do has the potential to make a great contribution to the quality of life our graduates enjoy and to the world in which they live. We work tirelessly, and most often with skill, integrity, ingenuity and with great caring at helping each of our students to develop all of their gifts to the very fullest extent. I can personally attest to the impact that this kind of education has had on my life and on the lives of many others I have come to know through my experience at Ottawa University. I have seen this up close and personally, and in some cases, with almost miraculous results. This is good work going on here. And, I believe with all my heart it is God’s work. That is why I and many others on our team have given ourselves to be a part of it.

So it is that we attempt to make our specific case for the type of Christian higher education we provide at Ottawa University. We believe that both the institutional and personal rationale are most worthy and honorable, and we thank you for considering this case whether you are a student, parent, donor or friend.

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