

## Taking and Giving Credit

by Theodore Plantinga

If you were raised a Calvinist, you are probably uncomfortable on those occasions in life when you are called upon make much of your own virtues (e.g. in a job interview) or to draw up a lengthy list of your accomplishments. You may feel inclined to say, with Scripture: "Let another praise you, and not your own mouth ...." [Proverbs 27:2]

I don't suppose Ted Turner is a Calvinist. He recently gave away a billion dollars -- or *promised* to do so -- and it got him onto the cover of *Newsweek* and many another magazine. Again, Scripture comes to mind: "But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." [Mathew 6:3-4]

On a strict reading of Scripture, this text applies only to alms-giving, and not to good deeds in general. Our Reformed colleges seem to hold to such a strict reading, for they publicize their good works energetically. Since they acknowledge the authority of Scripture, we must take it that they believe they are not violating Matthew 6 when they do so.

What deeds do colleges perform? Much of the work has to do with credit -- the taking and giving thereof. And "credit," of course, is related to "credence" and "credibility." Colleges not only *teach* their students but also *accredit* their learning and vouch for it, so that the students can receive the recognition that is their due when they move on to yet higher learning or the workforce. I used to serve as Redeemer College's registrar (on a part-time basis, during the college's first two years). In that capacity I had to maintain records that relate to the credits the college handed out.

In my days as registrar I do not recall reflecting on the words of Jesus that now come to mind as I contemplate the taking and giving of credit: "It is more blessed to give than to receive." [See Acts 20:35] But today the colleges seem so eager to take credit for their good deeds and their contributions to culture that a chapel talk on Acts 20:35 might well be in order. Why this eagerness?

An initial answer is not hard to find. Since the Reformed colleges depend on public support and, more specifically, on donations, many of which are funneled through churches, they need to justify their existence every now and then. Part of the justification is a recital of what they do. Of course the bulk of the work is the giving of instruction, which includes marking papers, tests and exams, and consulting with students outside the classroom. But when you read the newsletters issued by the colleges, you do not hear much about all the teaching and marking that is underway. What you mainly hear about is activity other than the main work of on-campus undergraduate instruction.

Most Christian colleges publish lists of faculty activities (other than teaching) and faculty publications. And once you start with this business, you want the list to look impressive. One way to pad the list is to include work and publications of affiliated or adjunct scholars. A research center comes in handy, for it provides a link between one's college and the work of scholars in other institutions.

Redeemer College has two such study centers. One is devoted to faith and science, and the other to promoting and publishing the work of Herman Dooyeweerd. Every now and then, each centre produces a report of work that has been done under its auspices. And in both cases, much of the work involves collaboration between scholars at various places. When one reads such a report under the banner of "What are we up to lately at Redeemer?" one cannot help but be impressed.

Since Redeemer's practice in this regard is acceptable (I do not mean to criticize it here), it seems to me that we can unearth a principle buried within it, namely, that it is appropriate to take credit for good deeds performed either wholly or in part by one's affiliates. The Dooyeweerd Centre, for example, is directed and coordinated by a professor overseas. He draws on people on various continents to get the work done, most of which consists of translating, editing and polishing various works of Dooyeweerd. They are now beginning to come out in handsome hardcover editions published by the Edwin Mellen Press, which is also the publisher of three of my books.

It has occurred to me that it might be possible to spread the glory around. Redeemer College is, in effect, an affiliate of the Dooyeweerd Centre and lends some support to the work of the Centre, including especially the participation of some of its professors in Centre projects. Why couldn't a couple of other colleges also become affiliates of the Dooyeweerd Centre and thereby gain opportunity to list its publications and activities under their own banner, thus

proving to their respective support communities that they are active in scholarly affairs and thus worthy of continued financial support?

Similar thoughts have occurred to me in connection with "distance education" (admittedly an ill-defined term). For the last couple of years I have heard a lot of talk at Redeemer about how we have to be involved in this business. More specifically, we need to do more in the way of part-time degree studies and also expand what we currently offer by way of instruction that does not lead to formal credits or diplomas.

The interest in "distance education" was not always to be found at Redeemer. Very early in our history as a teaching institution, we were intent on offering *on-campus undergraduate instruction*. We were determined that we would not be deflected from our purpose.

Yet there was disagreement even before we opened as to what our purpose *should* be. I remember well that back in the 1970s, the period when the college was being planned, there were folks in our support community who maintained that the Ontario Christian College Association (that was our name before the Charter was granted in 1980 and the Redeemer name was officially adopted) ought not to establish a college in Ontario but should instead operate as a foundation that would raise funds to make Christian higher education possible for Ontario young people. More specifically, we should offer scholarships that would enable Ontario students to attend Calvin and Dordt and such worthy institutions.

Because such arguments were offered, we had to ask whether there was anything wrong with this approach to Christian higher education. In and of itself it seemed quite reasonable: after all, we had not set out to build an empire.

Now, we did not follow the foundation route but persisted with our plans for a college of our own right here in Ontario. Why did we reject the foundation option? One major reason was that we believed more young people would be served if we established a college of our own in Ontario. Another reason was that we wanted to give a unique Canadian focus to the Christian education those Ontario young people would receive at our college.

I remember distinctly that in those heady days of planning, there was considerable emphasis on the importance of maintaining our primary focus on quality undergraduate education, especially for the first two years of study. Today I believe this same emphasis is in order. Back in the 1980s we experimented by offering some seminary instruction at Redeemer. While the

instruction was certainly worthwhile in and of itself, the seminary dimension of our program did lead to some loss of focus and did draw some resources away from our primary mission -- undergraduate education. The two research and study centers which were established have likewise, in my judgment, led to some diversion of resources and loss of focus. When "distance education" suddenly became the goal to strive for, I began to wonder whether this new educational endeavor might not also have such an effect.

The 1970s proposal came to mind again: if we believe in the value of continuing education, would there be merit in supporting and facilitating existing ventures in the field, perhaps through non-exclusive sponsorship arrangements? Or would it be necessary for us to enter the field *ourselves*? And if so, what would count as a *Redeemer* venture in the field?

Let think for a moment about the possibility of co-sponsorship. It might be maintained that Redeemer already contributes a good deal to the field of continuing education by allowing and encouraging its people to speak and lead seminars under the auspices of other organizations of kindred mind, such as Institute for Christian Studies (ICS) and Ligonier. Why not declare such efforts part of our Redeemer outreach? In effect we already do so by announcing such events in our publicity releases as faculty activities. (These good works do double duty, for the sponsoring organizations also get to list them and take credit for them.) Could we go further by declaring that we are in favor of such continuing education and that we celebrate the efforts of other groups operative active in this field and commend those groups for what they are doing?

Consider an analogy: if someone asked us about a Christian approach to agriculture as an academic subject, we would say that we do not work in this area ourselves but that we appreciate and endorse the work of Dordt College. We would probably add that we urge Christian students who have chosen agriculture as their field to take advantage of what Dordt has to offer. We would endorse the idea of a Christian approach to agriculture and make mention of it in courses here, but we would also admit that the way to actually carry it out is to study at Dordt College. We could add that we are on friendly terms with Dordt College (in higher education parlance, she is our sister) and are with her in spirit as she seeks God's will for agriculture. We could even make mention of her agriculture program in our publications.

Some would object that it would be unfair for us to claim credit, in some sense or other, for work done by other institutions, or to associate ourselves with that work. But I'm not so sure this objection can be made to stick. Think about it for a moment. Let's suppose that CRC congregation X in the general vicinity of the

college has a fine and vigorous program of adult education. The credit for that program does not belong to us. But what if we established an affiliation with congregation X such that what they offered was somehow officially part of the work of the College and advertised by the college? Does this possibility sound far-fetched?

There is a significant parallel to be considered. On the Redeemer campus various courses are offered each summer for teachers in Ontario Christian schools. Some of these courses are taught by Calvin College professors and are used by students as credits toward Calvin degrees. Some are taught by people employed by the Ontario Alliance of Christian Schools. The administration and advertising of these courses sometimes gets a bit snarled because of the different organizations involved. But no one objects to our listing such activity, which take place on our campus, as part of the work of the college, and in some formal sense they are *our* courses. Is there any good reason why such courses should not count as part of the work we do at Redeemer?

Is there anything wrong with our taking credit for such courses, as long as we are willing to share the credit with Calvin College, the Ontario Alliance, and any other such body that might happen to become involved? I suspect that some people in our ranks will answer this question with an emphatic *yes*. But then I would like to know *why* a certain kind of education can only meet with our unqualified approval if it has the *Redeemer* brand on it. And I would also like to know what prior study led us to conclude that existing efforts in the field of distance education are inadequate and must be supplemented and/or replaced by Redeemer efforts. It should be noted that when we started the college, we did answer such questions as they pertain to on-campus undergraduate education.

One consideration that we would need to discuss is giving credit. When it comes to the mature learner, there are some who need no formal credits for the additional studies they may undertake in distance education programs. But there are also mature learners who pick up their studies on a part-time basis with the hope of earning a university degree that will help them in their career. For such as these, it will be important that distance education be carefully organized so that recognized credits will be given -- credits that may need to be transferred to some other program or institution. Redeemer is equipped and authorized to offer undergraduate credits; some other Christian institutions currently involved in distance education are not.

With this proviso in mind, would it not make sense for Redeemer to both give credit and take credit in connection with certain distance education programs that are already underway? Why couldn't the college form co-sponsorship

agreements in connection with existing programs and thereby claim that it is active in continuing education? Could this pattern not be applied to both credit courses and shorter non-credit courses, including those offered by hypothetical CRC congregation X mentioned earlier? Could the non-credit side of continuing education not have a consortium character?

There is one other angle on this business that must be noted briefly, namely, the role of new technologies of communication and learning. The rise of computers and the internet are opening many possibilities for self-study that did not exist twenty years ago. The general effect of the internet is to make physical distance less significant and thereby to heighten the possibility of distance education understood as education in which the teacher and the student are usually not in each other's presence. Would it not make sense to explore the internet aspect of distance education with an eye to undertaking a certain amount of distance education in conjunction with other organizations, some of which might be quite far removed from us, geographically speaking?

The careful reader of this essay will note that I am only raising questions and offering a few suggestions. Much of what I say here I have also said in meetings and memos at the college. The technology already exists. The precedents in terms of co-sponsorship also exist. All we need now is the willingness to think in somewhat different terms when it comes to taking and giving credit.

The Bible texts quoted at the beginning of this essay still have me feeling somewhat guilty about taking credit for our good works. But I believe that if we are willing to share the credit with our "affiliates," we will be less likely to stand condemned by the Bible's warnings about pride.

Perhaps the ideas in this essay aren't even original. Maybe you mentioned a couple of them to me in a conversation which I have conveniently forgotten. If so, please share the credit with me.