

Convocation Speech 2004
Gaylen J. Byker, President
Calvin College

“Academia Coram Deo”
Romans 12:1-3
Colossians 1:13 – 23a
Matthew 7:15 – 20, 24 – 27

In my first Convocation Speech in 1995 I described eight “Habits of the Mind” that should characterize a Christian college. In the intervening eight years Neal Plantinga and I have alternated Convocation Speeches on each of the eight habits that are listed in the inside front cover of your program.

We drew upon the writings of John Henry Newman, a Christian educator who lectured in the 1850s at the founding of a distinctively Christian university in Ireland. Newman believed that a thoroughly Christian university was necessary to counter the “godless colleges” of his era and the “ironically dilapidated ethos” of Oxford and Cambridge universities.¹ Newman’s lectures, collected in a volume called *The Idea of a University*, have recently been described by a prominent philosopher as, “the most important treatise on the idea of a university ever written in any language.”² But, despite Newman’s powerful description of the ideal Christian liberal arts education and the habits of the mind that should characterize a Christian university, his new university lasted only 28 years.

In the 1880s, about the same time that Newman’s ill-fated Christian university was being merged with the Royal University of Ireland, the Dutch theologian, scholar and newspaper publisher, Abraham Kuyper, led the founding of a distinctively Christian university

¹ David N. Livingstone, “The Idea of a University: Interventions from Ireland,” *Christian Scholar’s Review*, Volume XXX, Number 2 (Winter 2000): 186.

² Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Idea of the University: A Reexamination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 9.

in the Netherlands. It was called the Free University of Amsterdam because it was free of control or financial support from either a church or the government. Kuyper's inaugural address at the founding of the Free University contains some of his most profound thought and oratory. The address speaks eloquently of the Reformed purposes and character of a Christian university in much the same terms that we use at Calvin College.³ (Calvin was built squarely in the Kuyperian tradition and remains strongly committed to the Reformed confessions.) And, yet, by the 1970s the Free University had ceased to be a Christian institution in any meaningful sense, though a few Christian scholars carry on something of the original vision.

In this, my concluding speech of the series on the "Habits of the Mind" that should characterize a Christian college, I will draw upon the histories of Newman's and Kuyper's failed efforts to create and sustain Christian institutions. And, I want to propose that conducting "*Academia Coram Deo*," that doing our teaching and learning, our research and scholarship and our communal living before the face of God, involves three interrelated habits of the mind and the heart. Three ways of believing, thinking, acting and relating that can sustain a distinctively Christian and academically excellent college.

Conducting all aspects of academic life *coram deo*, before the face of God, has been a Calvinist rallying cry in higher education in this country since the founding of what were at their beginnings explicitly and staunchly Reformed colleges: Harvard, Yale and Princeton. The founders of these institutions, like Newman and Kuyper, claimed *every domain on earth* for Christ and insisted that *every moment* be lived *coram deo*, before the face of God. Kuyper stated this most eloquently in his Free University inaugural lecture:

No single piece of our mental world is to be hermetically sealed off from the rest, and there is not a square inch in the

³"Sphere Sovereignty", in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), pp. 461-490.

whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: “Mine!”⁴

And, yet, as James Bratt has observed, these Calvinists, “also set loose one of the most efficient engines of secularization the modern world has seen.”⁵

So, what went wrong? Why were the noble founding principles, purposes and character of these—and many other Christian colleges—not sustained? My proposal today is based on the belief that the people who constituted these institutions failed, both individually and collectively, to embrace and balance three, sometimes contending, habits of the mind and the heart. Three habits that are all necessary to sustain the conduct of academic life *coram deo*, higher education before the face of God.

These habits of the mind and heart are: First, the consistent practice of piety, that is, a personal and a collective engagement with God and his Word. Second, engagement with God’s world in recognition of the common grace that God grants to all of his creation. And, third, a constant awareness of and response to the antithesis – the ever-present conflict between sin and evil on one hand, and God’s will and kingdom on the other. Conducting and sustaining academic life *coram deo*, then, requires constantly embracing and balancing piety, common grace and the antithesis.

The wonderful, but daunting task of living *coram deo*, of doing all of our thinking, acting and relating in the conscious awareness that we are in God’s presence, is the other side of the coin of our belief in the sovereignty of God. The Apostle Paul makes this clear in the powerful passage read from Colossians 1. All three of the habits of mind and

⁴ Ibid, p. 488.

⁵ James D. Bratt, “What Can the Reformed Tradition Contribute to Christian Higher Education?,” in *Models for Christian Higher Education: Strategies for Success in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Richard T. Hughes and William B. Adrian (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), p. 125.

heart that I am suggesting as necessary for sustaining a truly Christian college are beautifully tied together in this passage. Paul says that we are rescued from the power of darkness and made members of God's kingdom through Christ's sacrifice, and that our reconciliation with God, and the world that he created and sustains through Christ, is the basis of our faith.

Our faith is established and held firm through the hope we have in the gospel. To continue in this faith and make it fully operative in our lives we need to nurture our relationship with God. We, individually and as a college, need to be regularly engaged with God and his Word. This is the essence of true piety. It involves personal and institutional commitment and allegiance to the triune God, not mere assent to abstract concepts like creation and transformation. In his forthcoming book on the essential characteristics of Christian colleges, Duane Litfin describes the need to know, worship, and have allegiance to Christ as the creator, redeemer, sustainer and judge of the universe.⁶ This is very different from Newman's abstract assent to the existence of a "Supreme Being" as the basis for a natural theology. Intellectual assent to theism is a far cry from piety.

Unless we, individually and collectively, grapple with the scriptures, pray and worship with passion and commitment, we will not have the faith, the spiritual resources, to actually engage in the "integration of faith and learning." To love God with our minds, to have intellectual allegiance to him, we obviously need to know and love him. This does not have to become an otherworldly pietism that distorts faith and leads to withdrawal. As historian Mark Noll has observed, piety is the realization that "Christianity is a way of life as well as a set of

⁶ Duane Litfin, *Conceiving the Christian College* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, forthcoming), pp. 38-44. I am indebted to Litfin for his citation of several of the sources used in this speech.

beliefs,”⁷ and there is no inherent conflict between “warm piety and hard thinking.”⁸ In fact they need each other.

Abraham Kuyper himself had a passion for the life of the spirit that he constantly sought to balance with intellectual integrity, social and political activism and a strong concern for justice. He loved the idea of living *coram deo*, and, in addition to his voluminous writings on theology, philosophy, social policy and politics, he wrote devotional meditations, the best known collection of which is entitled, *Near Unto God*. In his devotionals as in his others writings, Kuyper “sensibly worked the line between spiritual and earthly concerns.”⁹ He sought to be deeply engaged with God and deeply engaged with God’s world. But, in part because of the religious and political context in which the Free University was founded, Kuyper built in an unfortunately rigid separation between the university and the church. In practice, he also kept the spiritual and the intellectual spheres far too distinct. As a result the Free University had no chapel and no connection to a church. This was not of as much consequence when all of the faculty and administrators were Reformed Christians, committed to Kuyper’s cause. But, when Kuyper’s successors felt the pressure for academic respectability and diversity, the drive for specialization, and the desire for government funding; the lack of intentional, institutionalized emphasis on and commitment to piety proved disastrous.

The key lesson here is that a robust piety, a fully-orbed engagement with God and his Word, is the basis for conducting and sustaining academic life *coram deo*. The great 18th century Calvinist theologian and educator, Jonathan Edwards, put it this way:

⁷ Mark A. Noll, “Christian World Views and Some Lessons of History,” in *The Making of a Christian Mind – A Christian World View & the Academic Enterprise*, ed. Arthur Holmes (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), p. 42.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 43.

⁹ Abraham Kuyper, *Near Unto God*, translated and adapted by James C. Schaap (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), “Introduction,” p. 12.

Only the heart changed by God's grace will understand itself, God, the world of nature, and the proper potential of human existence."¹⁰

This perspective is world-affirming, world-engaging, *and* it privileges the account of God's creation, redemption and restoration through Christ and makes it the touchstone of our teaching and learning, our research and scholarship and our life as a community. And this is the starting point of the connection between the habit of piety and the second, interrelated habit, the habit of living as agents of God's common grace.

What is God's common grace, and what does it mean to live as agents of that common grace? God created the world good. He delights in all aspects of it – its beauty, its marvelous processes – and he desires the shalom, the flourishing, of all his creatures, even those who are not recipients of special or saving grace. And though sin entered the world through the Fall and affected every aspect of creation, it is still God's handiwork. As part of God's common grace Christ came to "reconcile all things," as Colossians 1 puts it. As part of God's common grace all things hold together in Christ, and Christians have the privilege and obligation to be engaged with all intellectual and practical aspects of God's world; to begin the redemption of God's creation. That is why at Calvin we teach, learn and write about politics and science, education and social work, philosophy and foreign languages as part of the "cultural mandate." And it is why we take delight in seeing our graduates go out as agents of transformation in law and medicine, teaching and engineering, government and business, science and recreation.¹¹

Recognizing and living as agents of God's common grace is one of the great strengths of the Calvinist tradition and one that we take

¹⁰ Noll, "Christian World Views and Some Lessons of History," p. 44.

¹¹ Richard J. Mouw, *He Shines In All That's Fair: Culture and Common Grace*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), and "Common Grace" in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), pp. 165-201.

seriously at Calvin. Reformed Christians have frequently heeded the command passed on by Jeremiah to, “seek the welfare (or shalom) of the city [where you have been sent], and pray to the Lord on its behalf.”¹² Our concerns for justice and the restoration of people and structures distorted by sin and evil – for the building of shalom – are central to what we are as a college and how we perceive our mission. The key for Christians who would conduct academic life *coram deo*, however, is that we recognize and act as agents of God’s common grace, that we engage with God’s world, in response to and in keeping with our engagement with God, himself. We need to see ourselves as agents of God’s unfolding purposes in this current age – not our own purposes.

The concept and conduct of common grace have been great strengths of the Reformed tradition in higher education. However, they have also been among the tradition’s greatest weaknesses. This is what James Bratt was referring to when he noted that the Reformed tradition in higher education has “set loose one of the greatest engines of secularization [and I would add secularism] the modern world has seen.”¹³ It is a common trend for many individuals and institutions to move from the concept and practice that “everything is sacred” to the concept and practice that “nothing is sacred” or has *any* spiritual significance. In one manifestation of this trend, “The progressivism of liberal Christianity succeeded so thoroughly that it obliterated the Christianity.”¹⁴ Such people believe that they can carry out God’s purposes in this world without being committed Christians. This process often involves, as Richard Mouw describes it, the granting of an “across-the-board upgrade” to all aspects of culture, with a nod to God’s common grace. The result is that institutions often focus on the positive aspects of culture and work for the common good, but cease to be Christian.

¹² Jeremiah 29:7 (NRSV).

¹³ Bratt, “What Can the Reformed Tradition Contribute to Christian Higher Education?,” p. 125.

¹⁴ Mark A. Noll, “The Future of the Religious College: Looking Ahead by Looking Back,” in *The Future of Religious Colleges*, ed. Paul J. Dove (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2002), p. 75, citing George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Unbelief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

This misunderstanding and misuse of common grace frequently results from two interrelated tendencies. The first I have already cautioned about: loss of the connection between common grace and piety, the loss of the connection between engagement with God's world and engagement with God and his Word. The second tendency is to ignore or deny the existence of the ever-present conflict in this world between sin and evil on one hand and God's will and kingdom on the other. This tendency to ignore or deny the Antithesis is at the root of what Lesslie Newbigin calls our failure to engage in a "missionary confrontation" with our culture.¹⁵

"The good creation is God's thesis....the fall of our first parents [initiated] humanity's antithesis to God's thesis."¹⁶ As St. Augustine saw it, there are two spiritual kingdoms arrayed against each other in the world, and their mutual opposition is central to the historical process. This conflict exists within each of us because of sin. And this conflict exists between the worldview and life system based on Christ and the worldviews and life systems of fallen cultures. In referring to the field of education, Kuyper described this as a fundamental confrontation between the worldviews and life systems of "normalists" and "abnormalists," between those who believe and act as if the world is normal and those who believe and act as if all of life is distorted by sin and evil.

Nicholas Wolterstorff offers two reasons why we often miss this conflict. He says that we "scarcely see the world as Christians" because our "patterns of thought are not those of Christianity" but those of our time and place in history. And second, many Christians, including many Christian scholars, lack a deep understanding of the Christian faith. "We see only pieces and snatches and miss the full relevance of our Christian

¹⁵ Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986).

¹⁶ Henry Stob, "Observations on the Concept of the Antithesis," in *Perspectives on the Christian Reformed Church: Studies in Its History, Theology and Ecumenicity*, eds. Peter DeKlerk and Richard R. DeRidder (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1983), pp. 241-258.

commitment.”¹⁷ This contrasts sharply with the Apostle Paul’s call in our series text, Romans 12, not to be conformed to this world but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds.

We are called to combat the materialism and hedonism of our culture – to be in opposition to its worship of individual autonomy, its glorification of violence and its sexual morés; to challenge unjust domestic and international policies. Christians need to stand over-against the scientific naturalism, rampant relativism and post-modern cynicism of our day. Miroslav Volf reminds us that such non-conformity takes considerable courage, but is needed to “preserve the identity of the Christian faith and insure its lasting social relevance.” He says:

In contemporary de-Christianized, pluralistic and rapidly changing Western cultures, only those religious groups that make no apology about their “difference” will be able to survive and thrive. The strategy of conformation is socially ineffective in the short run (because you cannot shape by parroting) and self-destructive in the long run (because you conform to what you have not helped to shape).¹⁸

In the Irish university case, Newman failed at the outset to present such a Christian challenge to the rationalism and scientific naturalism of his day. At the Free University, the recognition and opposition to the Antithesis fell away with the decline in faith commitments and piety of its faculty. Neither institution sustained a “missionary confrontation” with its surrounding culture.

We have, then, these three interrelated habits of mind and heart, that combined, make possible the sustained conduct of *academia coram*

¹⁷ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1976), pp. 103-4.

¹⁸ Miroslav Volf, “Theology, Meaning and Power,” in *The Future of Theology: Essays in Honor of Jürgen Moltmann* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), p. 100.

deo. Three ways of believing, acting and relating that can sustain a distinctively Christian and academically excellent college. The consistent practice of piety – that is, personal and collective engagement with God and his Word. The engagement with God’s world as agents of the common grace God grants to all of his creation. And, the constant awareness of and response to the antithesis – the ever-present conflict between sin and evil on one hand, and God’s will and kingdom on the other. Embracing and balancing piety, common grace and the antithesis in our teaching and learning, our research and scholarship and our communal living is no easy task; few colleges or universities have been able to sustain higher education before the face of God. I have learned over the years, especially from my Kuyperian mentor, Richard Mouw, that piety provides the spiritual resources needed to embrace and balance common grace and the antithesis. And, I believe that consistently conducting academia *coram deo* is the worthy and wonderful calling of Calvin College.