

## The Calling of the Christian College

Nicholas Wolterstorff, in an influential article, “The Mission of the Christian College at the End of the Twentieth Century,” argues that

people have come to see that scholarship itself is conducted out of differing perspectives and that the integration of faith and learning which beckons us does not consist in tying together two things independently acquired but consists of practicing scholarship in Christian perspective . . . rather, competent scholarship is seen to be a pluralistic enterprise . . . the calling of the Christian scholar is to practice scholarship in Christian perspective and to penetrate to the roots of that scholarship with which she finds herself in disagreement—along the way appropriating whatever she finds of use (1983, 15).

Wolterstorff continues,

the Christian college cannot neglect the suffering of humanity. It cannot neglect the suffering produced by alienation from God, and it cannot neglect the suffering produced by the natural world. But also it cannot neglect the suffering produced by the social world. It cannot burrow into culture while neglecting society. . . . To act responsibly in reforming society, one must know the structure and dynamics of that society (17).

He argues that the Christian college must enter into a new stage, not losing the contributions of earlier stages in Christian higher education (which focused on piety and evangelism, and the contributions of culture) but moving to a new focus on society—on the Christian *in* society. Wolterstorff articulated three particular challenges for Christian colleges at this historical crossroads:

1. A Christian college must become “much more international in its concerns and consciousness . . . American influence spreads throughout the world—sometimes for good, sometimes for ill;

and in turn, our society here is profoundly influenced by what happens across the globe” (17).

2. A Christian college must “explore new ways of packaging the learning its presents to students. When our concern is simply to appropriate the stream of culture, then the relevant packages are available and familiar: physics, literary criticism, music theory, economics, etc. But when our concern is to equip our students to reform society, then we walk in uncharted terrain” (17).
3. A Christian college must “be far more concerned than ever before with building bridges from theory to practice. Throwing some abstract political science at the student along with some abstract economics and sociology will not do the trick. The goal is not just to understand the world but to change it. The goal is not just to impart to the student a Christian world-and-life-view—it is to equip and motivate students for a Christian way of being and acting in the world” (17).

The authors of this volume contend that academically based service-learning is one way to meet this challenge to explore new ways of packaging the learning so that students are equipped to reform society and are motivated for the task of being, and living as Christians in the world.

We cannot dictate to students exactly how to live and be in the world, but we offer them opportunities to explore the world, to probe, to ask hard questions, to interact face to face with people whose life experience has been different from most of our students. We offer them opportunities to see how theories are actualized in practice and of how practice is informed by theory. Steven Garber, in his book *The Fabric of Faithfulness*, raises an important question. “How do students learn to connect presuppositions with practice—belief *about* the world with life *in* the world—in the most personal areas and the most public arenas?” Garber argues, “True education is always about learning to connect knowing with doing, belief with behavior; and yet that connection is incredibly difficult to make in the modern university”

(1997, 43). It is precisely this sort of connection that service-learning helps to facilitate.

The Calvin authors of the chapters that follow find inspiration for, and articulation of, their teaching aims in the larger mission statement of Calvin College. Put most simply, Calvin College exists to “train young people, by means of a liberal arts curriculum and according to the Reformed tradition, for a life of Christian service in any vocation.” So service *and* learning are at the heart of the college’s mission—learning *for* the purpose of service. Calvin is a confessional Christian college, with living commitments to a particular religious tradition. Central to this tradition is the conviction that God created this world, its institutions, and its peoples for joy and delight, for shalom (Plantinga 1997). We do God’s work when we delight in the world, study its intricacies, and use our creative gifts. But the world is not what God intended: human rebellion has corrupted both the natural world and the social world. People live with suffering, injustice, pollution, illness, war—a distinct lack of shalom. Our central task as a college is to equip students to do God’s reconciling, restorative work with people, societies, and the natural world.

All of our learning, and all of our service, is undergirded by the theology of the Reformed branch of historic Christianity. This Reformed tradition brings at least five historic strengths to Calvin College’s enactment of service-learning.

### **A Holistic Theology**

The theology that finds expression in both the mission of Calvin College and the service work of its students and faculty is characterized by a holistic understanding of human personhood and a complex grasp of both individuals and structural patterns of injustice. This service is done humbly in the names of Christ but must be based on a sophisticated understanding of persons and institutions. This service must minister to bodies and minds, individuals and structures, and the living and the nonliving worlds. “Saving souls” is not more

noble than saving jobs or saving lakes: all are restoring what God intended in creation. Feeding minds and feeding bodies are essential but so in the study of food systems and political inequities. Artistic and creative pursuits, economic and academic work, all can be the work of service if they are done for the glory of God and the restoration of the human community. Our new core curriculum statement says it this way: “In the Reformed tradition, the life of Christian service is not limited just to the church and its missions, it is found in every vocation where God’s creative and redemptive purposes are pursued” (Calvin College 1999, 2). This holistic concept of service mandates high-level academic work.

### **An Emphasis on Learning**

How is learning necessary as a grounding for service? If service is so important to the Christian life, why not just stop tuition, move out of the dorm and into the central city, and free up professor and staff to bring cups of cold water to the thirsty world? The answers to these questions give power to Calvin College’s mission as a liberal arts institution.

Since Tertullian asked his famous question, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” the worlds of higher education and the church have been constructed as being in conflict with one another. But, of course, this has been a simplistic and misguided view. Much of the impetus for scientific discovery, philosophical inquiry, and artistic expression was found through a religious view of the world. Intellectual forebears of Calvin College such as Augustine in the Patristic era, John Calvin in the time of the Reformation, and Abraham Kuyper in late nineteenth century Europe all saw intellectual work as a central task of the Christian community. The bedrock belief that faith, learning, and service are central to each other forms the foundation for most Christian colleges. The Dean of the Chapel at Calvin writes:

From Claudia D. Beversluis, introduction to *Commitment and Connection: Service-Learning and Christian Higher Education*, ed. Gail G. Heffner and Claudia D. Beversluis (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2002), xxiv–xxxi. Excerpt reprinted by permission of the publisher. THIS MATERIAL IS COPYRIGHTED.

I believe we could summarize our calling in Christian college education as follows: in an academic setting, with the peculiar tools, perspectives, and resources of academe, we have to equip ourselves with the knowledge, the skills, and the attitudes that can be thrown into the struggle for shalom, the battle for universal wholeness and delight. The calling is exceedingly broad. We must never narrow it down to personal piety. But our role in the calling at this place is particularly academic” (Plantinga 1997).

Christian colleges stand as testimonies to the conviction that learning itself is an act of Christian obedience and a preparation for work in the world.

### **A Tempered Transformational Vision**

The college trains in doctrine and faith by engaging the world, by educating Christians beyond simple belief to effective belief, by equipping Christians to transform the world in their individual areas of calling (Van Harn 1996, x).

Transforming the world is not a small task, and yet it is at the heart of the educational mission of many Christian colleges. This “transformational mission” is the direct result of a belief that education is not a morally neutral task but exists for the purpose of witnessing to God’s purposes for the creation. But the Reformed tradition is permeated with an awareness of human weakness, weakness that can be found in both the servers and the served. It is the awareness of personal and institutional limitation that tempers our “transformational vision.” Calvin’s mission statement puts it this way: “We are called to correct the exploitation and oppression of people, to alleviate pain in the world, and expunge evil from ourselves.” And our core statement echoes this need to know ourselves and our weaknesses: “Thus Christians learn to shun what is evil and to cling to what is good. In so doing, however, they also learn how often good and evil are twisted around each other, so that each seems to grow out of the other, generating the great ironies and mysteries that fill the history of our

world. They learn how often we deceive ourselves about where real good and evil lie, and how such deception dulls and distorts our grasp of reality” (Calvin College 1999, 2).

### **A Legacy of Service**

It is not difficult to make the case for the role of service in a life of faith. The biblical injunction to “let justice roll down like water and mercy like an ever rolling stream” (Amos 5:24) has been a rallying cry for service in the Judeo-Christian tradition since its very beginning. Our heritage of faith shares this mandate and embodies it through both individual lives of service and a rich legacy of service-oriented institutions. In the Grand Rapids metropolitan area, where our college is located, a large proportion of the nonprofit agencies were begun by religious organizations or with religious motivations to help the poor, cure the sick, or integrate the marginalized. The Reformed communities of which we are a part have national and international agencies that not only provide immediate relief, but work on long-term developmental projects throughout the world. Many of these institutions are more than one hundred years old. A large percentage of Calvin alumni find their life’s work in nonprofit service agencies, and many more devote extensive vocational time to volunteerism in their communities. Our legacy of service can be found in the long history of the volunteer and service-learning movement at Calvin, a history that is recounted in the chapter by Berg in this volume.

### **Genuine Partnership**

The conviction that all people are created in the image of God demands that we always take others seriously. We can never do service to another, but rather, we participate with the other in a partnership designed to mirror, in a very small way, God’s intention for shalom in this world. Both the server and the served have inherent

dignity, voice, and power, which must be respected and enhanced. The desire to see others as whole persons, the awareness of personal and institutional weakness, and the eagerness for learning and grace give us the motivation for developing genuine partnership with others. Because the Reformed tradition emphasizes the goodness of creation and created institutions, we can look for movements toward justice and peace wherever they are found and join hands with others in those movements.

### Service and Other Christian Colleges

All Christian colleges are not alike, and differences in educational philosophy, faculty, and curriculum can be seen that are related to the theological commitments of each college. Most Christian colleges have a legacy of service and see education for service in the world as central to their education mission. We have described some of the strengths of the Reformed perspective; other traditions bring different strengths to their understanding of and motivation for service in the world. Some traditions, for example, bring a strong emphasis on the role of service in developing or demonstrating virtue and personal piety. Other groups have had a particularly strong prophetic voice in the world with service as the enactment of that voice. Still other traditions focus on the experiential nature of theological understanding and stress the need for multiple voices for an inclusive theology. Yet other groups emphasize Christ's identification with the poor and our need to imitate that identification in our Christian lives. All of these traditions offer powerful, faith-filled motives for service, and all of them can enliven our understanding of the practice of service-learning. The chapters in this volume represent the reflections of one community of Christian scholar-teacher-servants. We invite faculty in other institutions, especially faculty with the rich resources of a theological tradition, to work out the implications of their faith for their own work as scholars, teachers, and servants.

Calvin College, the home institution of the authors of this book, has recently adopted a new core curriculum. The “Statement of Purpose” begins with these words—words that are also a fitting beginning for this book:

Of the several formulations of educational mission to be found in Calvin's Expanded Statement of Mission, none is more succinct or more precise than the following: “Calvin College seeks to engage in vigorous liberal arts education that promotes live of Christian service” (Van Harn 1996, 33). The distinctive feature of this mission is not vigorous liberal arts education, for hundreds of institutions of higher education across the North American continent are engaged in that very project. Nor is it to be found in the promotion of lives of service; for many schools are likewise engaged. Rather, it is the combination of these two elements under the heading of “Christian” (Calvin College 1999, 1).

Service, learning, and faith—this book is about the intersection of these three central elements of Christian higher education. Literally hundreds of books have been written about the ways that any two of the three concepts interact: i.e., how service and learning come together, how learning and faith are related, and how faith and service intersect and enrich each other. This book, however, combines all three concepts in what the authors believe is a natural alliance among three rich veins of treasure for the committed life.

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