

Higher Education that is Christian¹

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With more than 4000 colleges and universities providing higher education in the United States today, why should anyone attend Tabor College or Fresno Pacific University? And why should it matter to the Mennonite Brethren Church?

Christian Universities

The concept of higher education that is Christian is not new. Clement, a second century Church leader, was educated in Greece before becoming a follower of Jesus. Moving to Alexandria (Egypt) after his conversion, he opened what might be considered one of the world's first Christian universities. He suggested that faith and understanding exist in a symbiotic relationship. Faith facilitates learning and learning about God's creation strengthens faith. They thrive together, he explained, so the purpose of Christian education is ultimately to find truth—God's truth.

As we study the natural world, we see God revealed, we engage our minds, and we learn to think critically along the way. By examining the ultimate questions of life, students develop skills of observation, analysis, and critical thinking. They sharpen their verbal skills and quantitative ability by studying philosophy, mathematics, literature, music, art, etc. Because this helps develop the whole person (body, soul, mind, and spirit), these disciplines are sometimes called the "liberating arts."

Critical thinking

The most important contribution of higher education is to help students learn to think critically and analytically. As we discover new knowledge, we learn that some of what we had thought was true, isn't. Some of the most advanced information that we learned as undergraduates in the 1960s has been replaced by new understandings based on more recent research. It's not that some of what our generation learned in school is no longer helpful or relevant, some of it was actually wrong. Whether it's the discovery of the quark in physics or the sequencing of the human genome, we have to confront the implications of newly discovered knowledge. The rate at which information becomes obsolete is accelerating. Meanwhile, new discoveries often raise difficult and troubling ethical and moral issues.

So the primary goal of higher education is not the transfer of data that are quickly rendered obsolete. Rather, the mission is to develop students' critical thinking skills, enabling them to address new issues long after the specific information is no longer relevant. We believe deeply that it's more important to teach students how to think than

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to tell them what to think. Instead of simply transferring the accumulated knowledge of previous generations, we prepare people for a life of learning. Christian colleges and universities like Tabor and FPU, however, have an added advantage in fulfilling that mission—a link to eternal truth.

No other foundation

The role of the Christian educator, Clement suggested, is to live and learn, to explore new knowledge and test ideas. At FPU and Tabor, students develop Christian world views because this learning process is built on a personal relationship with God, the creator of the universe. Whenever Menno Simons signed his name to a letter or published a document, he affixed his signature verse (I Corinthians 3:11), affirming that there is “No other foundation than Jesus Christ....”

That same verse inspired the words on Fresno Pacific University’s logo, *Fundamentum Christus* (“Christ the Foundation”). Christ is the foundation of Tabor College as well. As students study God’s creation, they also learn about the Creator and are encouraged to develop deep, personal, and vibrant relationships with Him. Students learn to think Christianly not only about the content of their courses, but about the issues in their lives. They develop Christian world views that shape their beliefs and frame their actions.

Christians in higher education

Christians created the American college and university. Harvard and Yale were founded as Congregational institutions. William and Mary and Columbia University were Anglican. Brown University was established as a Baptist institution, Princeton as Presbyterian, and Rutgers as Dutch Reformed. Christians, as George Marsden writes in *The Soul of the American University*, were the cultural and religious establishment.

But Christian foundations do not assure ongoing commitments to Christian values and world views. Like many institutions, the University of Puget Sound’s seal formerly carried the words, *Christus fundamentum*, reflecting its historical association with the Methodist church. Several years ago, the buzz in the community was all about the university’s appointment of the first woman president of the institution in 100 years. Later, it dawned on people that she was also Jewish but by that time, *Christus Fundamentum* had silently disappeared from the university’s great seal. The same thing has happened elsewhere. Around the nation, many campus chapels have been turned into museums and concert halls.

The beginnings

Tabor College was founded in 1908 (under the leadership of H.W. Lohrenz, its first president) so Mennonite Brethren young people could obtain a liberal arts education. The name was proposed in recognition of what happened on the mountain where Jesus was transfigured. This school would be called Tabor College to reflect its purpose of

transforming lives. A faculty of three (President Lohrenz, P.C. Hiebert, and P. P. Rempel) opened the school with 39 students, and accreditation came in 1964. Throughout its history, Tabor has sent thousands of graduates out into positions of leadership in the Church and society.

Fresno Pacific was established as a Bible institute in the 1940s, became a junior college in the 1950s, and was accredited as a four-year institution in 1965. Around that time, the faculty crafted a document called *The Fresno Pacific Idea* that continues to frame the school's vision. It would be a Christian college, affirming the authority of the Bible of matters of faith and life, calling people to discipleship, holiness, witness, and service.

The *Fresno Pacific Idea* establishes the university as a learning community. The first universities were loose communities of students and professors who often taught in their own homes and apartments. Aristotle and Plato probably conversed while sitting on a log. At Tabor and Fresno Pacific, the conversation happens in the classrooms and athletic fields, in the cafeteria and performing halls, in the student lounges, and in the homes of faculty.

Students and their faculty mentors debate, contest, and grapple with critical issues. Knowledge, as Frank Rhodes suggests in *The Creation of the Future: The Role of American Universities*, is best generated, tested, and refined through challenge, debate, and open dialogue. Good ideas are tested and bad ideas are rejected when subjected to critical analysis.

This process of critical reflection prepares students to develop a response to issues they have never confronted before. As Oliver Wendell Holmes said, "One's mind, once stretched by a new idea, never regains its original form." That is why our students study those "liberating arts." People learning alone, on the other hand, easily become narrow minded and dogmatic, accepting false assumptions and untested conclusions.

The Fresno Pacific Idea calls the university to be prophetic, viewing the school as an extension of the mission of the Church. We are a society adrift, a place where values often give way to self interest. We have seen corporate leaders unapologetically amass private fortunes while looting the pensions of their workers. Teenagers unleash viruses that wreak havoc on the world's communication networks. Increasingly acrimonious election campaigns cause many citizens to give up on the political process.

In this context, Christian institutions like Tabor and Fresno Pacific engage our students in dialogue about (and in critique of) contemporary culture and practice. We promote informed reflection in our classes, helping students develop as well rounded individuals, citizens, and leaders in the Church. In doing so, Christian colleges and universities offer society help with its most vexing problems by providing scholarship anchored in values and applicable to our daily lives.

Thinking Christianly

As college presidents, both of us have received calls from angry parents or local church members along the lines of: “I understand that so-and-so spoke on campus. He/she is not a Christian. Didn’t I hear you say at the opening convocation that you are a Christian institution? How could you allow such a person to speak?” Alternatively, we hear: “I understand that you teach....(pick one: Islam, socialism, Marxism, evolution, creationism, fascism, etc.). I did not send my son/daughter to be exposed to that kind of garbage!”

Yes, we reply, we *teach about* a lot of things but we *believe* that God created the universe and has revealed himself through it. We teach the importance of a personal relationship with our Creator—the one who sent his Son to die for us, and whose resurrection gives us eternal hope. We also teach our students to think critically about their faith, to examine their values, and to find their own answers to the difficult questions of life. The faithful Christian college or university, James Burtchael says in *The Dying of the Light*, must be committed to more than piety. History has shown that they must also engage in and promote rigorous Christian thinking.

The mother of a freshman met the FPU president at a basketball game at the start of the second semester last year. She said: “Last August, I sent you my boy but you sent someone else back to us at Christmas; my boy had become a young man. We sent him to you with our family’s faith; he came back to us with his own. He went to college, uncertain and worried; he came back to us poised and confident.” Parents of Tabor students have said the same thing to the president of their school.

During college, people wrestle with life’s most difficult issues, examine their deepest values, and construct their own adult, world views. At Fresno Pacific University and Tabor College, students are taught by Christian professors who know their disciplines. These students are mentored by people who have given themselves to a life of ministry and service. Their world views are shaped by mature Christian scholars who have integrated faith and learning, theory and practice, learning and action. Unlike what some people believe, Christian higher education is much more than regular college classes—with the addition of chapel!

A nurturing environment

Part of the key to helping students learn to think Christianly is providing a nurturing environment. At Tabor, 80 percent of its student body is involved in athletics, drama, music, student government, or service programs. Over the years, many of its students (including the two of us) have gone on to graduate schools, medical and dental schools, or law. The size of both institutions enables students to become leaders in student government, school organizations, etc.), preparing to take on responsible roles in their own churches and communities.

Fresno Pacific University is highly respected in the San Joaquin Valley not only for the quality of its undergraduate programs but particularly for its preparation of

teachers. Many school administrators have told the FPU president that they prefer hiring the university's graduates, not only for the level of preparation they bring to the classroom, but for the quality of the people that the institution graduates. At FPU and Tabor, professors learn to know their students and mentor them in ways that would be impossible in large institutions. Caring and skilled professors do more than transmit the accumulated knowledge of the past, they help students build careers and develop as Christians.

At risk

Operating church colleges and universities has never been easy, which is why so many denominations have given up on it. Many Christian colleges are at risk today. By some estimates, a third (or more) of the four-year Christian colleges will fold during the next decade. The loss of denominational support has forced some institutions to look elsewhere for students and resources, reshaping the character of what were once Christian colleges and universities.

FPU and Tabor celebrate the fact that the Mennonite Brethren churches remain close to their schools. We thank you for the students you entrust to us. We also thank you for your prayers, your counsel, your time, and your financial support. We see our work as an extension of the Church, a partnership that serves Christ and helps build His Kingdom.

Even when successful, this ministry is expensive. Increasing enrollments mean more buildings, more faculty and more services to teach and support the students who come seeking. But the opposite of growth is death for Christian colleges and universities. More than the death of institutions—empty buildings and declining grounds—the death of an opportunity to prepare Christian leaders for the Church and to proclaim the truth through scholarship and service. In the words of Seattle Pacific University President Philip Eaton says, Christian colleges “...engage the culture with the transforming Gospel of Jesus.”