

They began either as Cathedral schools (e.g. University of Paris, which grew out of the Cathedral of Notre Dame; Oxford University) or at least as small colleges where all the teaching was undertaken by one religious order or another (e.g. Peterhouse, the beginning of Cambridge University). The organization of their libraries and the shape of their curriculum show what held them together: the unity of knowledge was bound up with the assumption that theology is the queen, since all truth is God's truth, and what he has disclosed of himself in the Word (theology) or in nature is all of a piece. The *uni* in *university* was grounded in revelation.

With the Enlightenment came a gradual shift in perspective. This did not happen overnight. Many of the greatest early minds of the Enlightenment were profoundly Christian. If the eighteenth century was the century of David Hume and the French Revolution, it was also the century of Thomas Reid, Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, and the Wesleys. Nevertheless, the Enlightenment emphasis on autonomous reason was gradually aligned with rising philosophical naturalism. In the nineteenth century, John Henry Newman's seminal *The Idea of a University* could still envisage a Christian (Catholic) university where theology held the vision together, and the liberal arts provided all the help that the natural world (Protestants would prefer to speak of "common grace") might provide—whether in civilization, rationality, courtesy in debate, intellectual training, and independence of judgment. Newman's descendants generally prefer to remember what he said about liberal arts than what he said about theology. By the twentieth century, the scarcely less important work by Karl Jaspers, *Die Idee der*

SBJT: What is the role of New Testament studies in a Christian university?

D. A. Carson: For the last two years, the institution I serve, Trinity Evangelical Divinity school, has been incorporated into a larger body, a fledgling Christian university. Yet the roots of this enterprise go back precisely one century. Because we are celebrating our 100th birthday, various festivities and memorials are taking place, not least among them the publication of a book that looks backward with gratitude to God while reflecting on the way ahead. My part in this book was to write an essay under the title, "Can There Be a Christian University?" (see pp. 20-38 of this issue of *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*.) That assignment encouraged me to re-read things I had forgotten, dig out essays and books I had not read, and above all try to think my way through the subject. With that lengthy essay completed, my problem in this limited space is how to select a few points that will adequately establish a foundation for what needs to be said on the present topic.

The first Western universities were founded at the end of the twelfth and the beginning of the thirteenth centuries.

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Universitat, had replaced Newman's theology with a form of German idealism. Jaspers sees the unity of the *university* in a fairly ill-defined idealism and a great deal of impassioned pursuit of objective truth. However difficult that pursuit may be, it is still held up by some scientists (e.g. Paul Gross and Norman Levitt, *Higher Superstition*) and, suitably modified, by some historians (e.g. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Idea of the University*).

So a simple contrast is discernible. Medieval and early Enlightenment universities were *universities* by virtue of their commitment to a unifying vision of revealed religion and the concomitant theology; late modernist universities were *universities* by virtue of their assumptions regarding the objectivity of truth and the power of the human intellect to uncover it. The unifying factor shifted from content to method, with a much hazier conception of unifying truth. The current shift toward postmodern epistemology, however, has left both these visions in tatters. Truth itself is now widely thought of as purely perspectival. There is lots of truth, but no objective truth. Methods themselves are incurably tied up with socially conditioned worldviews. In this sort of framework, a contemporary university may be a place for tertiary education, equipping people (for instance) with various professional skills, but there is no common vision that makes it a *university* any more. Perhaps it should be called a multiversity.

Thus we come to the *Christian* university. Sadly, many universities began as Christian foundations, but for various reasons went astray. The reasons are complex; entire dissertations have been written on that subject. Not a few institutions that refer to themselves as Christian universities today are Christian in that a

substantial number of their faculty profess to be Christians—but that's about all there is to it. Many of these faculty members are sincere believers, but innocent of any real theological grasp, incapable of worldviewish thinking. They teach their subjects more or less the way they are taught in secular universities, sometimes self-consciously aping secular universities, preserving only a veneer of biblical proof-texting.

My argument, then, is that a Christian university worthy of the name should take self-conscious steps to reverse these trends. Concrete things can be done: hiring procedures can be reviewed, accountability structures can be established, discussion groups can be set up in an inter-disciplinary fashion to encourage worldviewish thinking, faculty development can become more intentional and more confessionally secure. I have tried to outline these and other practical steps elsewhere.

It is only at this point that one may usefully respond to the question, "What should be the role of New Testament studies in the Christian university?" For unless one agrees on what a *university* is, and what a *Christian* university is, the question remains too fuzzy to be useful. For the sake of argument, I shall assume that the biblical scholars in this hypothetical Christian university are profoundly committed to the truthfulness of Scripture and are unabashedly confessional in their self-understanding. I shall also assume (though the assumption is fairly utopian) that the Scriptures are being taught, at some level of excellence, in every discipline: that, too, is part of the role of New Testament studies in a Christian university.

Moreover, if the university is genuinely shaped by the Word of God, then the entire community will cherish all teaching

that is faithful to Scripture, alive with devotion, worldviewish in perspective, rooted in history and accurate exegesis while proving contemporary in formulation and interaction. The New Testament scholars must not only attempt to excel in their narrow field, but must earnestly seek to build a “whole Bible” biblical theology – and then seek to relate it to the world in which they live. Further, because they belong to the community of the university, they should seek to find or establish university structures in which the marrow of such biblical theology is disseminated throughout the community – even as they themselves profit from the broad exposure to university colleagues with diverse areas of specialization, thus enriching themselves in cultural awareness and expanding their own horizons lest their biblical vision be too narrowly constrained.

What New Testament scholars in a Christian university must *not* do is devote *all* their energy to the specialized monographs of their own guild, such that the biblical formation of the university is entirely neglected.